CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
MACHINATIONS

V0 - Chapter 1: An Opportunity

Year: 2009

Location: Saitama City, Japan

At the top of a tall building, inside a private office, a man stood gazing out of the large glass-paned windows, reinforced to protect against any external threats, seemingly lost in his thoughts. Dwindling rays of sunlight from the setting sun illuminated his face, revealing his golden orbs and light brown hair that was combed back neatly. Faint signs of wrinkles starting to develop on the man's face highlighted his growing age, but the finely pressed suit, polished formal shoes, and crimson tie ensured that the man maintained his sharpness.

Turning away from the countless buildings and homes highlighted in orange, the man glanced at his white, hydraulic desk that carried a tablet, an empty cup that previously contained coffee, and an ordered stack of paperwork. It was clear that the man was taking a break from his work.

"I better continue reading through the reports from my executives before the head of intelligence arrives," the man sighed out loud, resigning himself to continue with his work.

Taking a seat in his sturdy, wheeled chair, he adjusted the seat's height and reclining angle using the levers, finding the most comfortable position to continue with his work. Glancing down at the tablet, he picked up the new prototype electronic device that he had acquired from a certain individual. Typing in the passcode and subsequently entering an encrypted folder, he was presented with various summaries from the executives in his organisation.

These documents were confidential and only this man had access to all the information contained within the reports. His organisation

took information control and security to the extreme, ensuring that all information was compartmentalised. In other words, people were only told what they needed to know to complete their jobs and only had access to information that was within the scope of their role.

In the unlocked, encrypted directory, six documents popped up, each published by various executives of the man's organisation: head of curriculum development, head of cybersecurity, head of security, head of procurement, head of social communications, and head of finance.

Double-tapping on the screen opened up the report written by Suzukake Tanji, the head of curriculum development. Opening the PDF file revealed neatly assigned titles for each generation and accompanying bullet points to summarise the key information.

"The new delivery we received earlier in the month contained 200 new subjects ready to undergo the thirteenth generation curriculum."

"Subjects from the seventh generation, who underwent the level six curriculum I designed, are not meeting the set threshold, resulting in an exponential increase from 3% to 27% in their dropout rate. This new data suggests that level six may be the limit for an average human. However, I recommend further testing to conclude with certainty."

None of this was of any consequence to the man, but the next two paragraphs made the man's eyebrows raise momentarily before a cold look overtook his expression.

"First generation subjects' numbers have decreased from 15 to 5 in the last week. Unfortunately, it seems that despite their visible lack of emotions, the remaining Subjects, G1-001, G1-027, G1-043, G1-067, and G1-097 attempted to perform a mutiny, successfully injuring one of our instructors who had let his guard down. I hypothesise that the first generation subjects had a silent camaraderie amongst themselves and the recent disappearance of over 10 subjects served as the catalyst to induce such a violent reaction. In my professional opinion, these subjects are unlikely to produce any more useful data. Therefore, I humbly request clarification on what disciplinary process we should carry out."

"Recently, the more sadistic instructors from the fifth generation have been constantly taunting their corresponding subjects, mocking them for being unable to reach the heights that subject G4-004 from the fourth generation has achieved. As a result, I observed an interesting phenomenon occurring with regards to how the fifth generation subjects are behaving. In short, the fifth generation, whose specialisation was communication, have split into two factions. One worships the results produced by G4-004, almost like he is a messiah figure for them. Conversely, the other faction resents G4-004. I humbly request clarification on whether disciplinary action should be taken."

'The first generation was merely a test run to establish which instructor would take the reins and construct the future generations' curriculums. Among the three instructors—Souya, Ishida and Suzukake—Suzukake nurtured his batch of children skillfully, obtaining the best results despite his subjects seemingly no longer possessing the innocence a normal child would have. I too believe their value has dwindled in terms of data. However, they can still be of use in ***another way****.'*

Under a secure line, the man transmitted his orders cryptically, using jargon that only select executives were privy to. Disciplinary actions fall under the code of DCP-XX, with the "XX" characters representing unique numbers that identify a particular disciplinary process in the **White Room**. However, this man had a different idea in mind...

"Proceed with the **D-01** process," the man said ominously.

Executives who were given the greenlight to carry out any D-XX process knew all too well what such a process entailed. On the other hand, the D-01 process was something that newer executives had no knowledge of, as it was a procedure that is rarely used given how well order is maintained in the White Room. However, in the earlier stages of the project, certain **examples** had to be made to send a message to subjects, from specific generations, to what would happen if they dared to bite the hands of their master.

'Regarding the fifth generation, the outcome is favourable. The students have separated themselves into two categories. The first being weaklings who will always crumble when faced with a wall they can't climb. However, the second has the potential to possess the heart of a predator. If

I want my vision to become true, which is to see Japan lifted up from its decline, then I must annihilate the old roots that have destroyed our foundations and allow the new seedlings to prosper in their stead. If I can nurture the youth, so that they can stand up to the geniuses around the world, then a new phase in Japan's history can be born.'

The heart of a predator. Those who possess such an attribute won't stumble, nor fall in the face of a mountain, but rather relentlessly strive to overcome the obstacle they face. That is what this man believed, at least. He was a person who started with nothing. No excellent attributes that could make him stand out from the crowd.

However, the one thing he did possess was his relentless ambition to stand at the top of Japan, no matter the cost. But there were always going to be **obstacles** in his way.

As he read through the rest of the contents, his gaze sharpened on the last paragraph in Suzukake's report.

"Regarding Subject G4-004, who had completed the beta curriculum approximately two weeks ago, we are beginning to administer the new testing modules that you provided to us. So far, everything we have thrown at him has been perfectly absorbed. His level of adaptability is truly an anomaly that I haven't fully deciphered, which is why I hope to be able to capture Subject G4-004s limits with a new curriculum. However, I will require time to create a proper extension of the beta curriculum that Subject G4-004 can undergo."

"Now, when it comes to combat, there is no one left in the **White Room** who can contend with him. I believe Subject G4-004's performance at the meagre age of 9 years old where he annihilated the group of ex-professional fighters, whose names have been forgotten, proved that fact. To continue his upward trajectory, we will be putting Subject G4-004 into increasingly disadvantageous positions to see how he performs. His results will be presented for use in the next monthly report."

Suzukake's report concluded there.

For a moment a faint smile flickered across the man's face before being replaced with his usual stoic look.

*'Subject G4-004, or rather, **my son**, is continuing to benefit me with the data he has been generating. Not only has he gathered various investors, but the data he has provided has been priceless in constructing future curriculums.'*

That's right, this man, **Ayanokōji Atsuomi** enrolled his own son, **Ayanokōji Kiyotaka**, into the White Room's most rigorous, harsh, and cruel curriculum in it's history. In Atsuomi's mind, as long as Kiyotaka survived through the first five years of the curriculum, whatever happens to him afterwards was of no concern to Atsuomi. Whether he died or not did not matter, as long Kiyotaka generated sufficient data.

After finishing Suzukake's report, Atsuomi moved onto the next report by the Head of Cybersecurity, Fujimoto Takashi.

"There have been no attempts to penetrate the White Room's network. However, there were attempts to infiltrate your files at one of your offices. Fortunately, all attempts were quickly neutralised. This is all thanks to the superior **technology** that has been acquired to us by yours truly. The new artificial intelligence that we have implemented, and have full control of, was able to identify any individuals trying to break into our network and swiftly back trace their location. Furthermore, the new encryption software is practically unbreakable, and the added contingency of decoy systems will help us to deceive any foolish, future hackers or investigators. However, we will continue to remain vigilant and not let our guard down, diligently monitoring the White Room's network to ensure any confidential information is not leaked."

As previously mentioned, the White Room organisation had many departments to maintain the integrity and secrecy of the facility. All critical pieces of information were stamped with their corresponding clearance level and managed by the cybersecurity department. However, this did not mean that all workers in the cybersecurity had permissions to access the intelligence within the documents. Only the head of cybersecurity had the access codes and even then there would always be a log of who opened what documents. Information control and security were among the top priorities in the White Room.

Atsuomi finished reading the remaining contents of Fujimoto's report and proceeded to skim through the reports from the head of security and head of procurement.

"There have been no unauthorized breaches reported in the White Room. We continue to maintain our secrecy with our location not being easily disclosed. Thanks to the new **technology** that Sensei acquired for us, we are easily able to subdue any rogue subjects who have **broken down** and decided to go on a violent rampage."

"Procurement processes for future generations have been operating smoothly. Our franchises are scattered orderly, with many unrecognised and undocumented children being filtered out. Any time where we can't meet thresholds, we look into black market brokers as a last resort source. Of course, we take proper precautions to ensure there are no traces."

Satisfied with what he was reading, Atusomi moved onto the relatively more important reports, starting with the report from social communications.

"With Ayanokōji-sensei's recent emergence in politics as a new politician, we are continuing to push forward our propaganda to pedestalize Sensei as someone who cares for the youth. However, as expected, the old guard are showing a lot of resistance. We recommend that Sensei should consider making more public appearances in the news. The social communications department can set up specific reporters to butter up the news. It is imperative that Sensei increase his presence in the Citizens' Party."

'As expected, the old rotten roots in parliament are preventing the new ones from expressing their potential. They continue to leach and weaken Japan's foundations, which has ultimately led to our decline. Those old fools with their silver tongues are continuing to plummet our country for their own benefit.'

It was evident that Atsuomi loathed the system that was in place and once he accomplished his ambition and became Prime Minister in Japan, he planned to dig out the fossils still remaining in parliament to make way for the young blood whose potential can start to flourish. Creating such a scenario will shake Japan momentarily but

will eventually lead to Japan being uplifted from the mud that it was being dragged through. This was what Atsuomi believed.

However, the next sentence made Atsuomi click his tongue in annoyance.

"Ryosuke Tanaka, from the Peace Party, is continuing his attempts to recruit Sensei into his party. However, we have been declining his advances."

'It seems Ryosuke's age has finally caught up with him. Despite me constantly refusing his advances, he continues to try and recruit me. He truly is desperate, but his intentions are crystal clear.'

There are two major political parties in Japan. The ruling party, also known as the Citizens' Party, and the opposition party, also known as the Peace Party.

Ryosuke Tanaka was a prominent member in the Peace Party and had maintained his seniority for many years. Just like every other politician, he has a silver tongue that he carefully uses to manipulate the populous to support him. But underneath that public persona rested a snake who was ready to bite at any opportunity given to him. This was because overall, the Citizens' Party had more influence, power, and support than the Peace Party. However, conversely, the Citizens' Party's power and supporters was divided amongst the four existing factions.

Atsuomi was fully aware of what Ryosuke was aiming for when he tried to recruit Atsuomi.

'He wants to use me as an attack dog against the other factions, creating disorder and chaos to ultimately destabilise the Citizens' Party. His intentions are so clearly telegraphed that even a fool could evade such a simple scheme.'

However, Atsuomi did not resent Ryosuke for his actions, in fact, he thanked him in his head.

'An enemy whose intentions are known are easier to predict and prepare contingencies for.'

Proceeding to the final report in the encrypted directory, was the report completed by the Head of Finance, Kawamura Shinji.

"I am delighted to inform Sensei that we have received various new investors, including but not limited to, Kanzaki Engineers, the Ishigami Group, and Nogi Pharmaceuticals. Of the three I named, Kanzaki Engineers in particular took action to support our project without us even prompting their aid. Furthermore, some of our more prominent investors have increased their investment into the White Room project, with the largest increase being from President Amasawa, who has doubled his investment to ¥200 million. However, this was on condition that we accept another child, from one of his mistresses, into the White Room program."

A faint frown appeared on Atsuomi's face upon hearing the news. Atsuomi did not particularly like President Amasawa. During meetings with investors, he would always show up in unprofessional attire such as flip-flops, shorts or a classic Hawaiian shirt. But since he was a prominent investor in the White Room project, Atsuomi had to treat him with some care.

'Another child, huh? If he wanted to mess around with women he shouldn't have gotten married. Well, that's not my problem anyway. The more he can't control his urges, the more he will invest into our project to cover up his infidelity.'

As previously mentioned, the procurement process involved obtaining children mainly from 'legal' methods and also through black market brokers. However, sometimes, children born from mistresses of wealthy men were sometimes placed in the White Room project. These children were generally treated with more 'care'.

'It seems for the most part, things are progressing smoothly.'

Atsuomi continued reading through the remaining bullet points outlined in the financial report provided by Kawamura. However, he was interrupted by the sharp knocking outside the door of his private office.

'That must be the Head of Intelligence for the White Room, Takahashi Etsuo.'

Ordinarily, Takahashi would make a monthly report similar to the other executives. However, he had informed Atsuomi that he had critical information to report in person.

"You may enter, Takahashi."

The knob on the door twisted, gently opening with a low creak. The increasing clearance in the door revealed a handsome young man, who appeared to be in his mid-twenties, carrying a secured, leather briefcase.

Adorning a tailored suit and a slim tie, Takahashi's emerald eyes met Atsuomi's before he quickly bowed to him as a sign of respect.

"Good evening, Ayanokōji-sensei, I have some important news to share with you."

Walking with graceful steps, he gently stepped towards the unoccupied seat opposite to Atsuomi. With methodical precision, he carefully laid the briefcase onto the empty space on Atsuomi's desk so that the lock was facing Takahashi, exerting great effort to ensure he did not disturb Atsuomi's belongings.

Takahashi subsequently fished the key for the briefcase out of his pocket, placing it in the lock and turning it anticlockwise. A following audible clicking sound indicated that the briefcase was successfully unlocked.

Given the smoothness of Atsuomi's desk, Takahashi was easily able to rotate the briefcase such that the unlocked side was facing Atsuomi, before gently opening the lid to reveal an assortment of papers.

Atsuomi's eyes naturally gravitated to the contents of the briefcase, where upon it being fully opened he began reaching for the documents containing the critical information that Takahashi had gathered. Takahashi, who had memorised a summary of the contents of the documents, had no personal use for them.

"Tell me what you've gathered, Takahashi," said Atsuomi, whilst skimming over the contents of the pages.

"Yes, Ayanokōji-sensei. For starters, there have been a few

independent nameless journalists hoping to make it big snooping around the finances of our organisations. Ordinarily, journalists would have a good grasp of who or what to look into, knowing that they might meet an unfortunate 'accident' the next day if they unwittingly step on a dragon's tail. However, these journalists seem to have no care in the world to the point where it is very suspicious. I have a conjecture, though."

Atsuomi glanced up from the papers with his signature stoic expression before nodding his head slightly, prompting Takahashi to continue with his theory.

"I suspect that Naoe-sensei and Isomaru-sensei goaded the journalists into investigating you, Ayanokōji-sensei."

The carefully selected words did not go unnoticed by Atsuomi. The use of "and" rather than "or" suggested that Naoe-sensei and Isomaru-sensei were working together.

"Are you suggesting Naoe-sensei and Isomaru-sensei are working together to undermine me, Takahashi?"

"Yes, however, it would be more accurate to say that this is a certain fact rather than a theory."

Upon hearing this statement, the normally calm, golden eyes of Atsuomi went wide for a moment, before quickly adjusting back to homeostasis.

"I assume this is the critical news you had to share with me then, Takahashi?"

"Indeed, Ayanokōji-sensei, Naoe-sensei and Isomaru-sensei, who are both in charge of their own individual factions in the Citizens' Party, have joined forces. Their influence is dwindling in the face of Senator Kijima's growing support."

There were four major factions in the Citizens' Party. Prime Minister Miyako's faction, Naoe-sensei's faction, Isomaru-sensei's faction and Senator Kijima's faction. The best way to describe their dynamics would be to use the two sides of a coin as an analogy. One side

illuminated by light, whilst the other is shrouded in darkness of the coin's shadow.

Naoe-sensei and Isomaru-sensei presented the darker side of the coin, due to them stooping to underhanded tactics to maintain their influence and power in the party. These underhanded tactics were essentially crimes orchestrated through grunt workers or associates of Naoe-sensei or Isomaru-sensei. Both Naoe-sensei and Isomaru-sensei had been in politics for a long time, and were often regarded as friendly, old rivals that were familiar with each other's tactics.

However, Naoe-sensei and Isomaru-sensei joining forces was unprecedented. But in Atsuomi's mind, he was almost certain that Naoe held the reins when it came to who was the more dominant between the two.

'It seems that Naoe-sensei realised that his only way to survive and maintain his power in the party was to join forces with Isomaru-sensei due to Senator Kijima's presence and possibly my recent emergence as a politician.'

If Naoe-sensei and Isomaru-sensei were said to be the dark side of the coin then Kijima was the light side, perched in the limelight as the Citizens' Party's 'golden-boy'.

Senator Kijima has a stellar reputation, with no scandals that suggested that he constantly drank or played around with women, his image was free of blemishes. Coupled with his clean policies, silver tongue, and youthful charisma, he had moved the hearts of the youth to the point where young party members blindly put their faith in him. Even Prime Minister Miyako had shown him favour.

However, Kijima's more noticable achievement was that he was one of the key individuals who introduced the existence of the **Advanced Nurturing High School** to the world, also known as ANHS. The government has big expectations for ANHS, which is visible from the extensive funding provided to the prestigious high school for students aged 15 to 18.

*'It seems the tides are turning. I better contact **him** after this meeting with Takahashi.'*

"Is there anything else, Takahashi?"

"Nothing major. A senior inspector from the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department has been noticeably sniffing around Naoe-sensei and Isomaru-sensei's activities, but other than this fact, there is nothing else critical to report, Ayanokōji-sensei."

"Good work, Takahashi, you are dismissed."

"Thank you, Ayanokōji-sensei," replied Takahashi, as he bowed his head to Atsuomi before getting ready to leave.

Carefully collecting the critical documents, Takahashi placed them back into his briefcase, subsequently locking it with the key he used earlier to unlock it before proceeding to get up in an orderly manner to exit Atusomi's private office.

Upon leaving the office, Takahashi ran his hand through his chestnut brown hair, that had been cleanly styled upon previously entering Atsuomi's private office, before wiping the beads of sweat that had collected on the back of his neck.

'Even after working with him for years, I still feel nervous in his presence.'

This did not mean that he was fearful of Atsuomi, rather, it would be more accurate to say that he had a deep respect for Atsuomi.

Upon watching Takahashi leave the room, Atsuomi glanced at his tablet, checking the cameras outside for any possible eavesdroppers.

*'It seems safe. I can now contact **him** with no risk.'*

Opening up a secure line that had been encrypted with the advanced encryption **technology** Atsuomi had obtained, he contacted an individual who had been a significant driving force in ensuring that the White Room project came to life and reached the heights that it had reached thus far.

RING* *RING

The call rang twice before it was answered. Atsuomi spoke first.

"What is the status of Operation: Erebus?"

"It's complete, our reach has extended to the highest ranks of our enemies."

The voice that responded was calm and measured, delivering words with cold precision.

"Excellent. It seems that all the pieces in my plan are coming together. I give you, the **Shadows of the White Room**, full authority in executing **Operation: Genesis**"

"Understood," the voice on the phone replied before swiftly cutting the call.

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Location: Unknown

The room was sterile. No decorations in sight, just pristine, white walls stretching endlessly. Harsh and unyielding ceiling lights illuminated every corner of this vast room, ensuring there was no shadow in sight.

For most children, this environment would have felt suffocating, but not for the young boy, clad in a standard-issue white gown, perched at his white desk. Despite being only nine years old, his golden irises no longer possessed the innocence a child should have; rather, they only reflected the teachings imposed onto him by this facility.

Nevertheless, the young boy's gaze was focused on the monitor in front of him, as lines of text flickered across the screen. Numbers, equations, logical puzzles—they were the young boy's world, the only reality he had known since his birth.

It was not the love of a parent that greeted him, but the unforgiving white walls that welcomed him into this world. Children in his generation also suffered the same fate as him, but only this young boy understood the harsh reality of this facility shortly after his birth.

No one would come to save him. That was the truth this young boy understood.

With no one else but the young boy in the sterile room, only the faint whooshing sound of the large industrial air conditioners could be heard.

HISS

The opening of a mechanical door disturbed the atmosphere of the room, revealing an instructor adorning a long white lab coat, with one hand carrying a tablet and the other a special pen.

Whilst seated on his desk, the young boy turned his head slightly, causing the loose strands of light-brown hair on top of his dome to move as he carefully watched the older man approach him.

The instructor glanced at his watch before quickly scribbling down notes onto his tablet. With no warning the instructor spoke with an authoritative edge to his cold voice.

"Subject G4-004, begin the test."

On the screen, the puzzles changed, growing progressively more complex. The young boy's fingers moved quickly with precision, solving each of the problems depicted on the monitor with calculated efficiency and no pause. Hesitation wasn't allowed here, lest you incur the wrath of the punishments that follow by the instructors who were observing.

As the young boy worked, his mind wandered—not away from the task at hand, but beyond it. Each problem wasn't just a test; it was a glimpse into the world beyond these walls. A world he had only seen through virtual reality but never touched or smelled. Somewhere out there, people lived lives that went past logic and reason. They laughed, cried, and found joy in things that he couldn't understand. He wondered what it felt like for a brief moment, but quickly suppressed those thoughts. They weren't essential to his survival.

The instructor spoke up again, priming the young boy to work quicker. "Faster. Your current performance is 3% below target."

This was a lie. His performance had far exceeded the expectations set for him. But the instructor's inherent sadistic nature liked to push

children to their limits and watch them break. After all, it took a 'special' kind of individual to find amusement in watching children suffer and collapse.

But this young boy was special. Although, initially, he may stumble with the tasks thrown at him, in the end, he will inevitably absorb all the teachings that the White Room hurls at him. This fact alone frustrated some of the instructors, which is why in the earlier stages, when there were more children in his generation, the instructors liked to single out and pick on the young boy.

However, none of this mattered to the young boy, as his fingers quickened to meet the set deadline. He wasn't afraid of failure. The fear that the White Room had engraved into his heart at a young age had disappeared, only leaving behind a hollow gap for the cold to seep in, freezing his heart. He understood the fundamental truth of the White Room—if you cease to grow, you you cease to exist.

He had witnessed countless children hit their limit, breaking down in despair when they did not meet the threshold for any of the tests. Seeing the once occupied desks being empty the next day, with the desk being removed shortly after, taught the other children what would happen if they didn't produce the required results.

Thus, the young boy always sought growth because he too did not want to disappear. That was the only thought that kept him from falling down from the insurmountable mountain that was the fourth-generation curriculum.

When the session ended, the young boy leaned back slightly, his breathing even and face unreadable. The instructor proceeded to scribble down notes onto his tablet, before glancing at the young boy to announce the verdict.

"Acceptable. You have your scheduled meal in room C1.04. But before that, remain seated because the higher-ups have a **message** to communicate."

Without another word, the instructor left the room, the door hissing shut behind him.

Sitting there for a moment longer, the ceiling lights suddenly shut off, leaving the sterile room in pitch black darkness.

The sudden projection of light onto one of the walls of the sterile room revealed a live feed of five first-generation subjects.

Their eyes, that were once dimmed by the White Room, no longer possessed any light left.

The condition that those children were left in was too horrific to describe.

But the message was clear, and the young boy understood it well. If you try to resist the White Room's authority and will, you will suffer the same fate as these subjects. It was an effective strategy to drive fear into the hearts of the subjects who may misbehave in the future, conditioning them to always obey.

The White Room staff had to drill one truth into the brains of all subjects from specific generations—there was no escape from the White Room's grasp.

The projected image disappeared, leaving the room in momentary darkness before the ceiling lights were powered on again.

His golden eyes quickly adjusted to the change in lighting, regaining their usual sharpness. The combat training the young boy had undergone enforced the importance of always keeping one's eyes open during any fight. After all, what good would a person proficient in martial arts be if obscuring their vision was enough to subdue them.

Recent changes in the young boy's physical education had put the boy in many disadvantageous situations where he had to be constantly analysing his surroundings to understand what his opponents could use against him and prepare the proper countermeasures. As the difficulty increased, the time he had to carry out his analysis decreased, forcing him to face stress that no child should have to face.

Leaving his desk in a methodical order, the young boy proceeded to

walk toward room C1.04 to fuel his body with the appropriate nutrients.

Walking up to the mechanical door, he glanced at the camera nearby that had its field of view fixated on the door.

HISS

The clearance in the door revealed the same instructor who had administered the young boy's test, armed with a baton and stun gun that was holstered at his waist, underneath his long, white lab coat.

"Get moving, Subject G4-004," the instructor spoke with a voice devoid of any emotion.

Walking side-by-side, the young boy and instructor walked in an orderly fashion down towards room C1.04, following the directions indicated by the labels plastered onto the never-ending white walls.

The young boy had already memorised the internal structure of the White Room—well, at least what he had seen of the White Room's insides, and knew which directions to take to reach his predetermined destination. There were doors which he was not allowed to go past as there was no reason for him to enter those rooms from the White Room staff's perspective.

Whilst walking down the corridors, the boy observed the 2D lattice-structured circular openings present on the sides of the walls. There was no doubt in his mind what purpose they served.

'The White Room is all about efficiency, I know this for a fact. In the event there were intruders or subjects had escaped into areas where they weren't supposed to be, they could just deploy a sleeping agent to subdue the obstructions and then ventilate that gas out into the atmosphere. I'm sure this is the method they used to subdue the first-generation subjects shown earlier.'

The boy knew there would be no meaning in rebelling against the White Room's authority because their security was impenetrable. If one wanted to escape from this facility, they would have to wait for a miracle-like opportunity.

Having reached their destination, the instructor posted up next to the opening in the wall.

"You have 15 minutes to complete your meal."

As he walked into the sterile room, he was met various white tables, each with roughly six chairs situated around them. The tables were pristine, just like everything else in the White Room, neatly polished to reflect the faint glow of the ceiling lights above.

With orderly steps, he continued walking towards the cabinet, picking up a tray containing properly portioned nutritious foods for him to consume.

Taking his tray to a nearby table, he placed the tray on the table before pulling out one of the chairs to take a seat on.

Pulling his tray closer towards himself, he proceeded to analyse his meal.

'Skinless, steamed chicken. A source of amino acids necessary for protein synthesis to promote muscle repair and growth. The chicken being skinless reduces fat content and optimises absorption rates.'

Chewing the meat slowly, he pushed away thoughts that entered his mind of the food being bland.

'Taste is not essential when the objective is to fuel the body with nutrients. Minimal preparation ensures no unnecessary additives or spices that could interfere with digestion are present. The White Room can't afford for its students' abilities to be impaired whilst absorbing the curriculum's teachings.'

His eyes drifted to the quinoa in the top right of his tray.

'Quinoa, easy to prepare and store with a high nutrient density relative to its weight and volume. Rich in carbohydrates for sustained energy release, but the presence of fibre also improves digestion. The added protein complements the steamed chicken's amino acid profile.'

Lastly, the young boy's eyes drifted to the bottom right of his tray, containing steamed vegetables, specifically the vibrant green of

broccoli and dull orange of the carrots. As the young boy took a bite of the carrot, a memory unwillingly played back in his mind.

"Do you like carrots, Kiyotaka?"

In the memory, Kiyotaka was seated at the same table and same chair. He picked this table because it was the closest to the long, horizontal, glass cabinet where they retrieved food, making it more time efficient to return his tray when he had finished eating.

A young girl with dirty, blonde hair that extended to just below her shoulder blades was seated opposite him. Her purple gaze poised on Kiyotaka, eagerly awaiting his answer. Her demeanour was a direct contrast to Kiyotaka's 'cool' and calm appearance, where he seemed to be indifferent to her presence at his table.

They were the only two seated at this table, with the remaining four seats being empty.

At the time of this particular memory, over 30 children had already disappeared from the fourth-generation curriculum, and the remaining subjects had only recently begun their group training after exiting their initial four year period of isolation training.

Kiyotaka had crawled his way to the top of the curriculum. However, his success had sealed the fate of countless other children in his generation.

The more sadistic instructors took this opportunity to demonise Kiyotaka, isolating him from the other fourth-generation students who had formed small groups amongst themselves. Although individuals in these groups were ultimately competing against one another, they all recognised Kiyotaka as a threat to their survival.

But there was one young girl who didn't. Subject G4-005, **Yuki**.

At the time, Kiyotaka did not understand why Yuki always followed him around or tried to interact with him, just like she was doing now when she asked him whether he liked carrots or not.

He had been alone since his birth, with nothing but his own abilities to trust. That was what allowed him to stay at the top. Forming

emotional connections would be equivalent to chopping off one's own limbs, making survival in the fourth-generation environment impossible. That was Kiyotaka's perception. However, strangely, for reasons he didn't know himself, he talked to the young girl who always wanted his attention.

"I don't like nor dislike carrots. Carrots are rich in beta-carotene, which the body converts to Vitamin A, crucial for maintaining a healthy vision, immune function, and skin health, making it especially important to improve during our scheduled physical training. Coupled with the fact that carrots are a good source of fibre and are low in calories means that they are an essential food. How much I like, or dislike carrots is not a factor to consider."

Hearing such an analytical response, Yuki pouted.

"Kiyotakaaa, what kind of answer is that? You can only respond with a 'yes' or 'no'!"

Following her response, she shot him a small frown like she was disappointed in him, but only in a playful way, as a warm smile soon graced her face.

Shaking his head, Kiyotaka forcibly removed himself from the memory. He knew that thinking back on the memories he collected with Yuki as the focal point would only remind him of things he wanted to forget.

Kiyotaka didn't understand why today of all days he had recollected this particular memory. Eating bland meals, with carrots as one of the steamed vegetables, was a part of his daily life since his birth in this facility.

'I can't afford to dwell on such memories. I only have a limited time to consume the necessary nutrients before continuing my training.'

That was what he told himself. Keeping his body in the best of condition was the only thing that would keep him progressing in the fourth-generation curriculum.

The fourth-generation curriculum took individualism to the extreme.

The foundations of the beta curriculum were taught in the first four years, where all students would undergo isolation training. Other than the contents of the curriculum, including both physical and mental training, the only other information the students of the fourth generation were given was an overall ranking table.

Each student's name, unique subject number to identify them, and their relative ranking with respect to the other students, ranging from 0 to 100, was given to them in the form of a table that was updated weekly. Since the instructors never gave any positive validation to the fourth-generation students, the only way they could know their position in the fourth-generation was through the ranking table. As a result, the ranking system gave birth to rivalries and constant competition between the students.

All fourth-generation students knew they had to compete, lest they meet their demise, similar to how the first-generation subjects recently did when they tried to revolt against the White Room's orders.

However, the more sadistic instructors did not stop there. To induce more despair in the already broken hearts of the fourth-generation children, they deliberately told them that the difficulty of the curriculum would continue to exponentially increase in line with the top ranker's scores.

Suffice to say, the fourth-generation students with weakened hearts and minds listened to the whispers from the devils, and bared their fangs at the top ranker, **Kiyotaka**.

And well... in the end, the one standing tall at the pinnacle of the fourth-generation's beta curriculum was Subject G4-004, **Ayanokōji Kiyotaka**.

But the price he paid was no small one.

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Upon finishing his meal, Kiyotaka proceeded to return his tray to the long glass cabinet, placing the utensils and tray in the small counter designated for used dishes.

Turning away to leave the dining area, Kiyotaka's eyes strangely lingered on the seat opposite to where he had just been sitting, but the opening hiss of the mechanical door pried his eyes away.

"Let's go, Subject G4-004. You have a new training module to undergo today."

Stepping into the hallway, the door slid shut behind Kiyotaka, once again sealing away the memories of room C1.04.

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Location: Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department Headquarters, Japan

The dim light of a desk lamp cast long shadows across the crowded desk, where case files were meticulously stacked in precarious towers.

Senior Inspector Hiroshi Kameda was leaning backwards on his creaky chair, massaging his temples as his blue eyes scanned the latest report on organised crime. His personal office smelled faintly of old paper and burnt coffee, the familiar scent of a precinct that rarely slept.

"Nothing. Just another dead end," he muttered to himself, setting the latest report aside with more force than he intended.

Other than the everyday petty crimes recorded under organised crime in the report, there were two cases filed under missing persons. Apparently, two rookie, independent journalists had **disappeared**.

Over 80,000 people every year disappear in Japan, so no one would bat an eye if rookie journalists suddenly vanished from the face of the Earth.

'Looks like they went barking up the wrong tree. This is nothing new.'

Turning his eyes away from the report that now laid on his desk, he sharpened his gaze on the wall nearby.

On the wall hung a pinboard, depicting a complex web of connections—names, dates, places—all tied together with red string like a spider's web. At the centre of it all there were two key names with the photographs of their faces pinned violently to the pinboard —Naoe and Isomaru.

For five relentless years, he had been investigating Naoe and Isomaru independently, trying to uncover the full extent of their crimes. Bribery, embezzlement, racketeering—the list went on. However, whenever he thought he had a solid lead, it would evaporate like morning mist. Witnesses would recant their statements. Evidence would 'mistakenly' be mishandled or disappear, either being burned by flames following a gas leak or being buried. Even colleagues in law enforcement, who initially showed interest, would suddenly grow cold and dismissive, unwilling to risk their careers or their families.

Hiroshi was not someone who would fall in line. His sense of justice could not allow him to turn a blind eye to the illegal activities he knew that either Naoe or Isomaru were orchestrating. But the bitter taste of having no undeniable evidence to tie either Naoe and Isomaru to the crimes made his stomach churn. In his mind, catching grunt workers who were nothing but the cogs in the machine that is organised crime would never rectify any of the issues that plagues Saitama and Tokyo. If Hiroshi wanted to make a change he had to cut off the head of the snake, or in this case, snakes.

Glancing at the analog clock right above the long pinboard, he saw that it was nearly 9pm. Yet here he was, as always, poring over cases that no one else wanted to touch. In a department full of officers willing to turn a blind eye to corruption, Hiroshi was a rare breed: stubborn, principled and unshakeable in his quest for justice. However, those attributes and his unrelenting resolve had cost him, alienating him from his peers and earning him the reputation of being a fool who was chasing ghosts.

In their minds, trying to convict Naoe and Isomaru, who had ruled over the streets of Saitama and Tokyo for years, was the quest of a fool. They knew what happened to law enforcement personnel who

happened to dig too deep.

Hiroshi knew this truth, but his heart couldn't stand seeing Naoe and Isomaru walk away scot-free. They had caused too much pain and damage to countless innocent families.

Swiveling his chair to meet the small window in his office, he gazed out into the landscape. A city stretched out before him, showcasing a sea of lights and shadows. Somewhere out there, children were laughing, playing, and dreaming of futures untainted by the rotten corners of this world. That was the ideal that Hiroshi wanted to protect, the reason he had sacrificed so much.

However, tonight was one of the nights that the cynical part of his mind started whispering the doubts that he had pushed to the back of his mind, creeping in like unwelcome guests.

The man looking back at him in the reflection of the mirror was a harsh reminder of the toll this mission has taken on him. His once jet-black hair was now streaked with strands of grey, his once charismatic face lined with fatigue and frustration. However, his eyes, deep and blue like the ocean, still carried the same determination that had driven him all these years.

"Hiroshi," he muttered to himself, "What are you even fighting for?"

Turning back to his desk, he picked up the photo frame perched in the left corner of his desk. It was a picture of his family, taken years ago. His wife, Chisato, with her signature warm smile that radiated love and patience. Beside her, stood his older daughter, **Honami**, her light pink hair glowing in the sunlight whilst holding Yukari's tiny hands. Yukari had been just a toddler when the photo was taken, her wide blue eyes sparkled like water in the ocean would, reflecting innocence and curiosity.

Hiroshi's chest tightened. He had missed so much: both of his daughter's birthdays, family trips, and Chisato's quiet moments of joy. All for what? A case that felt increasingly hopeless as the days went by.

'We were happy then. Before I took this case...'

Hiroshi had distanced himself from his family and changed his surname with the help of an acquaintance from the bureau, who told him he would offer no further help.

He resolved himself to only visit on Christmas day despite his aching heart begging him to see them more often. He would come with gifts and try to spend as much time as possible to compensate, but the Christmas rendezvous always ended with the same bittersweet taste when he had to leave them, only to return the next Christmas of the following year.

It was nights like these where he would question himself on whether he made the right decision. To stand against corruption instead of falling in line like the others.

The faint buzz of the nearby television, posted up in the corner of his personal office, pulled him out of his thoughts. A pretty female news reporter appeared on the screen and began the late night news broadcast.

Hiroshi paid the television little attention, choosing to continue sifting through the countless documents that were stacked in tall towers atop his desk. That was what he planned until a particular headline caught his ear.

"In political news, Ayanokōji Atsuomi, a rising figure in the Citizens' Party, continues to garner attention for his philanthropic initiatives aimed at supporting underprivileged youth. Ayanokōji's recent efforts include funding children's hospitals and shelters for at-risk children. Many see him as a man similar to Senator Kijima—a breath of fresh air in a party dominated by veteran politicians."

The mention of a new name in the Citizens' party was enough to turn his head and observe the television.

'I've never seen him before. The only prominent names I know that are in the Citizens' party are Naoe, Isomaru, Senator Kijima and of course, Prime Minister Miyako.'

Hiroshi's eyes narrowed as Atsuomi's face appeared on the screen. The man was young, probably in his mid or late thirties, with a

polished demeanor and a smile that exuded confidence. His carefully chosen words about "investing in the future of Japan" and "creating opportunities for the youth and upcoming generations" were clearly designed to inspire hope in the audience's hearts.

"Hmph," Hiroshi scoffed under his breath whilst reaching for his cup of stale coffee. "Another one trying to make a name for himself."

He had seen it before many times—idealistic newcomers with grand visions, only to be crushed by the weight of tradition and corruption. The seniority system in Japanese politics was an impenetrable fortress guarded by greedy, old men in their late sixties and seventies, who had no intention of forsaking their power to make way for the promising youthful talents. The truth was that they did not care about their country and only cared about maintaining their power and influence. That was one of the fundamental reasons that had pushed Japan towards its decline.

At this moment, Hiroshi believed that Atsuomi would be no different than the other promising youths who had decided to try and make a name for themselves in Japanese politics. The system governed by the old men who occupied the top positions ensured that the young generation would be chewed out and spat out. The man on the screen, Atsuomi, would be no different. That was what Hiroshi thought.

However, there was something about Atsuomi that intrigued Hiroshi. Despite the smiles he showed on camera, Hiroshi's intuition painted a different picture of the man depicted on the television screen.

His demeanor, his posture, and his voice, as if his words were absolute. But it was his golden irises that intrigued him the most. Hiroshi's gut told him that they reflected a will akin to a predator, an indomitable ambition to devour all those who try to suppress him.

'Maybe he can change something.'

Hiroshi would keep Atsuomi in the back of his mind, checking the moves that he would make in the future.

The broadcast moved on to other news, but Hiroshi's thoughts

lingered on Atsuomi's words about supporting the youth, particularly children.

He wanted a world where his daughter could grow up without fear, where Honami's kindness and Yukari's curiosity could flourish without the shadows of corruption and deceit. Was that dream worth the sacrifices he had made? Could he still be the father they deserved?

Hiroshi's phone buzzed, snapping him out of his thoughts. It was a message from his wife, Chisato.

[21:15:36] [Chisato] Yukari wants to know if Papa will be home for Christmas this year.

The sentence made him hold his breath momentarily with a lump quickly forming in his throat shortly after. Regaining his composure, he quickly typed out a reply.

[21:15:45] [Hiroshi] Of course. I wouldn't miss it.

But even as he tapped send on his phone, doubt gnawed at him. Could he truly protect them while continuing to walk this dangerous path? Or would his pursuit of justice only bring more harm to the people he loved most?

Setting his phone down and swiftly turning back to his desk, Hiroshi's resolve hardened. He didn't have the answers to those questions yet, but he knew one thing: he had come too far and couldn't give up now. Not now, not ever. Someday, those snakes, Naoe and Isomaru, would grow careless and at that moment he wouldn't hesitate to eliminate the rotten roots that they had cultivated—no matter the cost.

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A/N: Hi to any of my readers. This is my first time ever writing fan-fiction—or a story longer than 500 words, for that matter—so I can't promise a perfect piece of literature. But I hope you stick with me on this journey because I have a lot of interesting ideas to implement into this fanfic.

I would just like to point out that V0 will diverge from the canonical version. The timeline for all of V0 will be 2009, unless stated otherwise.

That's all, have a nice day.

V0 - Chapter 2: A Sinister Plot

Location: Shinjuku, Tokyo

It was early afternoon. The sun had been blazing mercilessly overhead, softening the already weakened tar on the roads into a viscous, shimmering surface. White-collared workers were out on their lunch break, making the already busy Shinjuku region even more congested.

Taxis weaving between lanes, pedestrians impatiently waiting at the traffic lights for their signal to cross, school children skipping classes to visit the stores, cyclists cutting off cars and drivers subsequently cursing and honking at them for their behaviour.

Amongst the chaos, a luxury Japanese black sedan was slowly traversing the bustling roads of Shinjuku, trying to find the most efficient route to reach its destination.

An older man, adorning a classic suit and tie with newly polished shoes, was seated in the passenger seats of the luxurious car.

The man's head was tilted to the left, his left arm was resting on the windowsill with his palm clenched into the shape of a fist, supporting the man's head as he gazed out of the tinted windows. Polarised rays of sunlight penetrated the glass, exposing the man's grey hair that was once black in his youth.

Coming back from a meeting with his followers in the Citizens' Party had left his thoughts in a disarray, as the political situation was looking dire for his faction in the Citizens' Party.

His driver's voice abruptly pulled the older man out of his turbulent thoughts.

"We will be arriving at your estate in roughly ten minutes, Naoe-

sensei."

The older man, Naoe Jinnosuke, had been involved in Japanese politics for many years, steadily building up his power and influence and accumulating many followers by using his silver tongue. He operated in the shadows to ensure the Citizens' Party would remain stable, using whatever methods he deemed necessary. In Naoe's mind, the ends always justifies the means, even if they were for purely selfish reasons.

He had maintained an old rivalry with Isomaru, who also represented another major faction within the Citizens' Party. For a while, these two had been exchanging blows, trying to gain the edge over the other by amassing more supporters within their factions. Both of them had strong ambitions to become Prime Minister of Japan after Prime Minister Miyako had finished his term.

The people of Japan had initially predicted that Prime Minister Miyako's faction would remain steadfast and was the most likely faction to ascend as the representatives of the Citizens' Party for the next election.

However, the presence of both Naoe's faction and Isomaru's faction ensured that the people could not be so quick to judge who would ascend as the next Prime Minister of Japan.

Naoe had planned to contest Prime Minister Miyako for the position of the party's representative once he had amassed enough influence to suppress Isomaru. That was his initial goal, and with the way things were progressing, the vision Naoe had would have come to fruition.

However, the tide that Naoe once thought was on his side was quickly shifting as other players started making their moves.

The most notable was Senator Kijima, who had made his presence known at a relatively young age when compared to the seniors who had guarded the system that was Japanese politics. Most expected Kajima to fall in line like the other younglings who had naive ambitions to make a name for themselves in Japanese politics, but the exact opposite occurred in Kijima's case.

His unblemished record, with no scandals in sight, pedestalised Kijima as an incorruptible symbol who stands for the justice of the people. With his immense charisma, he had quickly won the hearts of his fellow party members, becoming an existence that could not be ignored in the power dynamics of the Citizens' Party.

Gazing outside the car's window, a particular billboard disturbed the stoic expression that once captured Naoe's face. His grey irises grey colder, sharpening on the individual depicted on the billboard who had interfered with his plans.

"Kijima-sensei..." He growled under his breath. The number of billboards that were promoting Senator Kijima had been increasing significantly over the weeks, campaigning numerous clean policies and promises to sway the people and increase his popularity.

Ordinarily, Kijima's clean record and rigorous campaigning would not have been enough to make a dent in the power dynamics that had once held the Citizens' Party hostage. But something which even Naoe could not foresee had occurred.

The elected Japanese government established under Prime Minister Miyako had shown great interest in Senator Kijima due to his hand in the creation of the Advanced Nurturing High School. It seemed like the Japanese government had high hopes for the newly established prestigious school that aimed to transform teenagers into fully-fledged model citizens of Japan, going on to uplift the nation from its decline. There were also rumours that Kijima and Prime Minister Miyako maintained a close relationship and that Miyako greatly favoured Kijima within the Citizens' Party.

Unfortunately, this meant that Naoe's operations, which he had orchestrated in the shadows to prepare for the next election, had been made redundant, as more people within the party, and even his own faction, shifted towards the Kijima faction.

Of course, the more loyal supporters of Naoe remained in his faction but that was only a handful of people. Consequently, Naoe's resources had decreased significantly, as he had less members that he could trust to carry out his orders. Running for the position of Prime Minister had become unfeasible, for the time being, forcing him to

scrap that idea. The priority for Naoe was for him to maintain his power and influence within the Citizens' Party.

Therefore, Naoe pushed aside his pride and begrudgingly formed a temporary alliance with his long-term rival Isomaru, aiming to push both Kijima and Prime Minister Miyako out of the picture for who was going to represent the Citizens' Party in the next election. Alas, once again, things would not go as Naoe had envisioned because Kijima was not the only player who wanted to enter the game.

'The shock from the earthquake that was Kijima was only the start of my decline in power. It was the destructive wave that followed that posed the biggest threat.'

A cancer that Naoe thought he had eliminated had re-emerged under his nose. He remembered that day very well. The look **that man** gave him when they went their separate ways.

It was the gaze of a predator staring at its prey. That man's fierce golden gaze drove a fear deep into Naoe's heart, making the hair along Naoe's arm stand on end. A fear that Naoe had never felt before was what was taught to him by a young man who was barely half his age at the time.

'Why didn't I kill him when I had the chance?'

Deep in his heart, Naoe knew why he did not carry out the killing. He had picked up that child from the streets many years ago and cared for him, showing him a new path to live in life. Naoe didn't know when, but he had grown attached to that child. Maybe it was because of the potential that he saw in the child when he picked him up. The way that child had handled all the 'dirty' jobs that Naoe had delegated to him with ease and fearlessness. But that glimmer of potential had blinded Naoe's eyes from seeing the depth of endless ambition in the child's eyes. That child would become a man who would not bend his knee to anyone, always exuding a thoroughly uncompromising attitude.

"**Atsuomi...**" He said with a shaky breath.

Ayanokōji Atsuomi was that child's name.

His recent appearance as a new politician within the Citizens' Party made Naoe uncomfortable. Naoe was convinced that after he had cut Atsuomi off he would no longer become a variable that would threaten him.

'But seeing him doing so well is strange. My associates told me that he owns various franchises in Tokyo and Saitama. But how did he amass enough wealth to sustain his seemingly endless desire for expansion?'

That was the question that had plagued Naoe's mind ever since he saw Atsuomi smiling on television. There was no way Naoe would not recognise those distinct golden eyes.

To answer that critical question, Naoe had sent naive, rookie reporters to investigate the source of Atsuomi's funding. Those reporters were so transparent with their ambitions that it was child's play for Naoe to manipulate them. Just dangling the prospect of becoming a prominent journalist in Japan was enough to control them into doing Naoe's bidding.

'I organised a trail for them to follow a few days back, but since then, I haven't heard from them.'

Even though Naoe had joined hands with Isomaru, his intuition was telling him that the walls closing in on him weren't going to slow down.

'I must eliminate Atsuomi at all costs if I want to stand a chance of suppressing the rapidly growing Kijima faction and maintain the power I have cultivated for years. The last thing I need is for the Citizens' Party to have another player enter the fray and cause further division and disorder in the party. Otherwise, the less influential Peace Party might bare their fangs that I'm sure they have been sharpening over the years. Looking for any opportunity to destabilise the Citizens' Party.'

As the imposing steel gates with their sharp, pointed design came into view, Naoe's thoughts were brought to an abrupt halt.

A small hut-like building was situated in front of the gate, where a security guard adorning a classic white uniform sat in his seat. Upon seeing Naoe's unique license plate, the security guard grabbed his

walkie-talkie, his lips mumbling out an incomprehensible sentence due to the distance.

The whirring of the gates snapped the black sedan's engine back to life, as it started moving along the long cobblestone driveway, navigating to the entrance of the wealthy estate. But the sight of a familiar black SUV left Naoe in wonder.

'That's Sugimoto. He must have some important information to report back to me for him to enter my estate unannounced.'

Sugimoto Tomoko was Naoe's most trusted subordinate and his right-hand man. He managed the 'shadier' operations that Naoe ordered Sugimoto to carry out, ensuring that none of the misdeeds would link back to Naoe.

Stepping out of his car, Naoe adjusted his tailored suit and strode toward the entrance. Sugimoto was already waiting for him, his demeanour calm but with an unmistakable air of urgency.

"Naoe-sensei," Sugimoto said, bowing slightly. "There are some developments you'll want to hear."

Naoe nodded curtly, gesturing for Sugimoto to follow him inside.

The interior of the estate was the perfect example of luxury and control, composed of expensive furniture, polished marble floor with golden veins that gleamed under the light of the chandelier, and other utilities like a personal bar.

Moving to Naoe's personal office, Naoe drew the curtains closed, leaving the lamp positioned on his work desk as the only source of light that illuminated the room. Taking a seat on the more comfortable leather recliner, Naoe began pouring himself a drink, taking a few sips before his once calm grey eyes focussed on Sugimoto, who had taken a seat opposite to Naoe.

"Speak," Naoe ordered.

Sugimoto leaned forward, interlocking his fingers and resting his elbows on his thighs, his voice low but steady.

"We've identified a higher-up in Ayanokōji-sensei's circle. One of our agents managed to get their hands on intelligence that described in detail the executive's personal life."

Naoe's eyes widened slightly before narrowing like a hawk.

'Obtained information regarding a member who is high up in Atusomi's circle? This could be the opportunity I need to uncover his operations—and perhaps even drive him to his destruction.'

"The executive's name is Takahashi Etsuo. He's a 26 year old man, standing 178cm tall, with short brown hair, and green eyes. His only known family member is his mother, Takahashi Natsue. She's just forty-two years old, having had him at the exceptionally young age of sixteen. Natsue is described as a kindhearted woman with golden hair and the same vivid green eyes as her son, Takahashi Etsuo."

Sugimoto paused, glancing at Naoe for a reaction before continuing.

"Their relationship appears unusually close. Takahashi is highly protective of her and provides a great proportion of her funds for daily life. She lives quietly in a secluded home in the suburban areas of Tokyo, trying to maintain a low profile. But her beauty and youthful appearance, despite her age, have not gone unnoticed by her neighbours. There is no doubt that her safety is his greatest priority, making her his biggest **weakness**."

Upon hearing the last details of the intelligence that Sugimoto had gathered, an unnatural grin spread across Naoe's face, mirroring the malicious thoughts that were now swirling in his mind.

'That Takahashi Etsuo fellow must have figured that since "Takahashi" is such a common last name, he could get away with not changing his name. After all, the bureaucracy around changing one's last name in Japan may have raised more eyeballs than he was comfortable with. Unless he's got a prominent position in society or a friend with some pull, it would be too risky. That is probably his perception. What's interesting is that he didn't take help from Atsuomi. Perhaps he hid the truth from Atsuomi? Well, no matter, he will be receiving a very nasty surprise soon.'

Naoe's gaze met Sugimoto's as he gave his next instructions.

"Begin making preparations, Sugimoto. I want you to keep track of all of Natsue's movements, that includes where she stops, who she talks to, and any routines. Do not miss any detail, no matter how insignificant it may appear. The operation that follows, after collecting the preliminary intelligence, must be completed as smoothly as possible."

Sugimoto inclined his head. "Understood, Naoe-sensei. Shall we proceed with the utmost secrecy?"

Naoe's grin widened subtly. "Naturally. She must not suspect that anything is amiss. When the inevitable time comes, she should be captured with calculated efficiency."

"And what about Isomaru? Should we inform him of our plans before starting the preparations?"

Naoe let out a deep sigh. "Yes, inform him of my plans."

Even though Naoe didn't want this temporary alliance, it would be best if he held back his pride and opted for the rational choice, that being informing his ally of an opportunity.

Nodding his head, Sugimoto left without another word, leaving Naoe alone in his personal office.

Leaning backwards in the high-backed leather recliner, Naoe's orbs stared into the amber depths of his whiskey glass, swirling the glass absently with only the clink of ice breaking the silence.

'That man, Takahashi Etsuo, is nothing but a cog in Atsuomi's growing machine—loyal, driven and useful. But even the most well-oiled cogs have weak points and I will show no hesitation in exploiting Etsuo's weakness.'

The glaring weakness, Takahashi Natsue, was no more than a chess piece now, her fate tied to the board that Naoe was meticulously crafting.

And if her son cared as deeply as Sugimoto's report suggested, the game would soon tip in Naoe's favour.

□□□□□□□ ✧ M A C H I N A T I O N S ✧ □□□□□□□

Location: Saitama City, Japan.

The sun had begun its descent, casting a vibrant orange over the newly renovated compound that housed the White Room's intelligence division, disguised as the headquarters of a private security firm. The use of surveillance equipment and highly trained personnel were more than enough to ensure that any intruders or unwanted guests would remain unaware of the true nature of the building's operations.

Takahashi leaned back in his chair, stretching after a grueling day of paperwork, coordinating with subordinates, and gathering intelligence. The gentle hum of his computer and quite rustling of air-conditioning were the only sounds in the room. His desk was neatly organised, holding general reports, dossiers, and encrypted files for more sensitive information that was recently collected.

Takahashi played a key role as the head of intelligence who reported directly to Atsuomi. His role involves completing many different tasks. Tracking and monitoring high-value targets, counterintelligence, information control, and human intelligence collection, are all examples of the sorts of tasks that he had to carry out and manage. For example, one of the methods used for human intelligence collection is through a network of people, some of whom were prostitutes.

These prostitutes were trained to extract secrets from politicians who whispered in their ears during their moments of vulnerability. Takahashi managed this web of informants with precision, ensuring every piece of intelligence was filtered, verified, and delivered to Atsuomi.

Glancing at the clock, Takahashi stood and began tidying up the workspace surrounding his desk. Outside, the building's security personnel were visible through the wide glass windows. A handful of guards armed with hidden melee weapons patrolled the perimeter, their movements precise and deliberate.

Before leaving, Takahashi walked through a sterile room, bathed in cool white light, to undergo his mandatory check carried out by the cybersecurity team for this building. The lead cybersecurity officer

handed him his personal phone, the device encased in a tamper-proof shell. After retrieving it, Takahashi submitted to the standard security check that all people who entered and left the building had to undergo. A guard with a well defined build and stoic expression scanned him thoroughly, ensuring no physical data or unauthorized devices that were capable of carrying sensitive information left the premises.

The cybersecurity team operated independently within the compound, ensuring there were no leaks in information. That way, they can't be swayed when intelligence officers make moves that are unauthorised. Essentially, they audit anyone within the compound.

As he exited the building, he reflected on the White Room—a name whispered among even the highest-ranking individuals with trepidation. Despite his position as head of intelligence, Takahashi knew very little about the exact contents of its operations, but was smart enough to know it was highly confidential information. The cybersecurity and security team was impenetrable, and the organisation's strict compartmentalisation kept most staff and even some executives in the dark. Only a select few held bigger pieces of the picture, but only one person knew everything, and that was Ayanokōji Atsuomi himself. He was a man known to hold his cards very close to his chest.

Takahashi's thoughts turned to his second-in-command, **Shohei Takamura**, a dependable colleague who had earned his trust over the years. The two shared a camaraderie that was rare in their line of work.

Shohei Takamura, as he is known to most, is a man of few words, but his presence commands attention. His short black hair, that hangs down all around his head like a bowl, tends to lead people to overlook him—until they notice his perceptive, deep blue eyes that can be unsettling when focussed on an individual. He is always dressed professionally, favouring dark, understated suits that convey authority.

Though older than Takahashi, they had no troubles in developing a friendly relationship, sometimes meeting for casual drinks and a meal

at a quiet bar or lounge.

After retrieving his personal belongings, Takahashi stepped outside into the cool evening air. The sun now hung low on the horizon, painting the sky in subtle hues of orange. The sight brought Takahashi a rare moment of calm where he could rest his mind from the relentless demands of his work.

Faint hums of cicadas filled the quiet moments between his steps as he made his way to where his car was parked, making a quick stop at the familiar payphone tucked beside a modest stone statue, before progressing any further.

Lifting the receiver, Takahashi dialed a number he knew by heart. The line clicked, and a warm voice answered after the first ring.

"Hello?"

"Mother, it's me," he said, his tone softening instantly.

Natsue let out a gentle laugh. "Etsu-kun, it's always good to hear your voice. Are you working too hard again?"

"You know me too well," he replied with a wry smile, though she couldn't see it.

"I'm coming over for dinner tonight. Anything you want me to bring?"

"You're the guest," she teased, "Just bring yourself. And maybe a story or two about work. You always avoid telling me the interesting parts."

Takahashi chuckled lightly, he could already imagine the visible pout that had formed on his mother's face as she had always been interested in knowing more about his work. But like always, he masked the weight of his real tasks, not wanting to burden his mother with worry.

"Fine, but no promises it'll be interesting."

As they exchanged a few more words, the conversation carried the warmth of their close bond. Despite her attempts to pry into his life,

she knew better than to push too hard. The call ended with a simple, heartfelt goodbye.

Sliding his phone back into his pocket, Takahashi paused for a moment. The distant chatter of the crossing pedestrians and the hum of cars filled the evening air, grounding him.

'I know she said to just bring myself for dinner tonight, but I can't help wanting to spoil her.'

Takahashi loved his mother dearly. She had taken care of him as a single mother throughout all of his childhood. He knew she was hurt that the boy, who she thought loved her, left her all alone to deal with a pregnancy they had both been responsible for, but she always put on a strong face for Takahashi. Despite only being 16 years old, she quit her dreams to take care of him.

Which is why Takahashi, at an early age, vowed in his heart that he would earn enough money so that she would no longer have to carry the burden of fending for him, ensuring that she could live a peaceful life for her remaining years.

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Struggling to find parking, Takahashi resigned himself to having to walk a distance to reach the familiar bakery.

Knowing that his mother would never accept extravagant gifts, since she had already been receiving money that Takahashi practically forced her to accept, Takahashi decided to go with something cheaper so that she couldn't refuse.

As he made his way to the nearby bakery, Takahashi couldn't help but notice the bakery's windows gleaming invitingly under the dimming sky. The aroma of freshly baked pastries permeated through the opening in the bakery's windows, pulling Takahashi in.

Approaching the glass door with a panel that read "Open", he gently

pushed on the door.

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The bell near the door produced an audible noise, letting the attendant know that a customer had arrived. A female worker appeared shortly afterwards, greeting him politely with a friendly smile.

"Excuse me," he said to the female attendant, pointing at a neatly arranged tray. "I'll take a box of those, please."

The pastries, delicately dusted with powdered sugar, were his mother's favourite. He paid for the box and stepped back out into the bustling streets, carrying the small treat in his hands. The city was alive with the rhythm of evening—couples strolling, children laughing, and street vendors selling their goods.

As he navigated the crowd back to his car, he accidentally bumped into a man coming from the opposite direction.

"Apologies," Takahashi said automatically, as he stepped back to create distance between himself and the stranger with short black hair.

The man didn't respond right away. Instead, he stood still, his face plastered with an eerie wide smile. His eyes, thin and snake-like, glinted with something cold and unreadable.

"No harm done," the man finally said, his tone smooth but ominous. Without another word, he moved on, disappearing into the crowd as if he had never been there.

Takahashi watched him go, a flicker of unease running through him. Something about the man's demeanor lingered in his mind, but he quickly shook it off. There were always odd people in the city and he had more important things to focus on.

Continuing his walk, he received a text message on his personal phone. The notification buzzed softly, and he pulled it out to check.

[6:39:40] [Shohei Takamura] Hey, want to grab a bite? Haven't seen

you all day, it would be nice to catch up.

The message was from his second-in-command, Shohei Takamura, perhaps his only friend in a profession where trust was a luxury.

[6:39:50] [Takahashi Etsuo] Sorry, I've got plans tonight. How about we meet up another day? I'll be free on the weekend if you're up for some drinks.

After a series of texts they decided to have drinks and a meal on a Saturday night.

Approaching his car, Takahashi got in the driver's seat and swiftly put on his seatbelt before slowly departing. As he crept closer and closer to his destination, he couldn't help but recall the memory of the man he had bumped into earlier when he was walking back to his car.

'What a strange man.'

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The small, traditional house was nestled at the edge of a quiet neighbourhood, its shoji doors slightly ajar to let the evening breeze sweep through.

Natsue greeted Takahashi at the door, her youthful features glowing with affection. Her long blonde hair was tied back in a loose bun, and her apron was stained and ragged from the cooking she had carried out before Takahashi's arrival.

"Etsu-kun! What's happened to your body? You're looking way too thin, please tell me you are eating properly!" Natsue exclaimed, the worry in her gentle green eyes was palpable.

Takahashi rolled his eyes, a small smirk surfaced on his lips as he stepped inside, taking off his shoes and setting aside the neatly packaged pastries onto the kitchen counter.

"Nice to see you too, mother. And yes, I'm eating. Just not enough of your cooking, apparently."

The small but cozy home welcomed him with its familiar warmth. The air was filled with the scent of spices and freshly cooked food. Paintings and family photos were perched onto the walls, each one telling a story of their humble yet loving life.

"You brought pastries?" Natsue asked, glancing at the box as she returned to the stove to check on dinner. "Trying to bribe me into forgetting to nag you about your health? You are so sly."

"Maybe," Takahashi replied, leaning against the counter. "But they're from that bakery you love, so it's a win-win."

"Hmph, this is not over, Etsu," Natsu said teasingly, before taking a gentler tone with softer words, "I won't ever stop worrying about you,"

Takahashi sighed. "I know..."

Dinner was served a short while later, a modest yet delicious spread of dishes Natsue had perfected over the years. Takahashi couldn't help but let a small grin surface as he tasted her signature simmered fish dish, his taste buds bursting with nostalgia.

"This is amazing as always," he said between bites. "I don't know how you do it."

"It's called experience," Natsue teased, settling down across from him. Her bright green eyes sparkled with mischief as she added, "A handsome young man like you must have girls chasing after him. When will I get to meet someone, hmmm? Or is my baby boy hiding his mystery girlfriend from me?"

Takahashi groaned, his chopsticks pausing mid-air. "Mother, not this again. Let me enjoy your cooking in peace."

Natsue giggled, the sound light and carefree. "Alright, alright, but one day, Etsu, you'll see I'm right."

Despite his protests, Takahashi found himself smiling—a rare,

genuine smile that warmed his usually stoic demeanor that he wore everyday while working.

As they ate, the conversation turned to lighter topics: her latest gardening efforts, the neighbor's noisy dog, and the weather failing to deliver on its promises.

But beneath the surface of their lighthearted talks, Takahashi's mind began to wander as he glanced at her hands—calloused from years of work, yet still gentle and steady. His gaze shifted to her face, where faint lines of age had begun to form, though they did little to diminish her charm and beauty.

Takahashi couldn't help but ponder the insecurities deep in his heart

'She's sacrificed everything for me.'

The weight of that recurring thought settled heavily in Takahashi's chest. Having him at sixteen, abandoned by her family and his father, Natsue had endured unimaginable hardships. She had taken on odd jobs, sometimes juggling multiple at once, just to keep food on the table and ensure he had a chance at a better life.

Their lives had been humble, but her unwavering love and determination had been his anchor. It was why he worked so hard now—to repay her in ways words never could. And that was only possible because Atsuomi had seen potential in him and allowed him to join his higher-circle, where Takahashi would go on to prove himself as being capable of leading Atsuomi's intelligence department.

Because Atsuomi had granted him such a title, Takahashi had managed to make enough money to support his mother. Seeing her slave away for his sake at a young age made him feel guilty. He wanted to show her how much he appreciated her and allow her to relax for the rest of her life, that was his dream. As long as she was happy, he would also be happy.

It was Atsuomi who helped him take a big step towards that dream, which is why he respected the man so deeply, even if he was still nervous in his presence.

As Natsue cleared the table, humming softly to herself, Takahashi's thoughts took a more somber turn.

'She hasn't dated anyone since I was born, at least as far as I am aware. She deserves happiness, but has always put me first, acting like she's content, but... is she really?'

Takahashi wanted to say something, to broach the subject, but the words stuck in his throat. How could he ask her to put herself first when she'd spent her entire life doing the opposite?

Shaking his head lightly, he abruptly stood up and began helping her with the dishes. She looked up, surprised but pleased.

"What's this? Etsu-kun is washing dishes? Should I call the papers?"

Takahashi chuckled softly. "Don't get used to it."

Working side-by-side, the room was filled with a comfortable silence. For a moment, it was enough—just the two of them, the quiet rhythm of the dishes, and the warmth of their little home.

But amidst that silence, Takahashi made a solemn vow to ensure and protect his dear mother's happiness, no matter the cost.

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As Takahashi hugged his mother goodbye, her embrace lingered for just a moment longer than usual.

"Be careful out there," Natsue said softly, her voice tinged with the concern of a mother.

He sighed gently, brushing it off with his usual stoic demeanor. "You worry too much. I'll call you tomorrow."

Stepping out into the crisp night air, Takahashi took a deep breath. The streets held a peaceful silence, save for the occasional hum of a

passing car or the light murmur of voices from distant alleyways.

Takahashi felt a sense of peace from their evening together. A feeling he welcomed with open arms to distract him from the relentless pressures of his work.

Unbeknownst to him, vultures had been circling on the edges of his world, no—his sanctuary.

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A dimly lit warehouse buzzed with a silent urgency. Shadows gathered about one man—Naoe's second in command, Sugimoto. A tall, gaunt man with sharp features and narrowed eyes, Sugimoto stood at the center of the room. He was dressed in dark tactical gear, perfect for blending in with the night.

His gaze locked onto the map of the city that lay spread out on the table before him, marked with red circles and lines that converged on a single name: **Takahashi Natsue**.

Sugimoto glanced up, his piercing orbs sweeping over the assembled team—each handpicked to suit a specific role in the operation.

"Listen carefully," he began, his tone icy and devoid of any emotion. "This is a precision operation. The target is Takahashi Natsue. Make it clean. No witnesses, and no unnecessary risks. And ensure she's unharmed. Our leverage depends on it."

The selected men all nodded silently, their faces obscured by masks, their bodies tense with anticipation.

A burly man with a scar running down his cheek spoke up. "What if her son interferes?"

Sugimoto's expression darkened, his voice developing a new sharpness that cut through the room like a blade. "Takahashi Etsuo is not your concern. Follow the plan. Any deviation, and you'll answer

directly to Naoe-sensei. Am I clear?"

With those final words, no one bothered to question Sugimoto any further lest they invoke Naoe's wrath for not following orders.

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Takahashi walked briskly back towards where his car was parked, the warmth of his mother's home still present in his thoughts. He was oblivious to the car that idled a block away, its headlights dimmed. Inside, two men sat in tense silence, their eyes fixed on his retreating figure.

"Target confirmed," one of them muttered into a radio. "The son's leaving the area. Proceeding as planned."

At the same time, Natsue moved about her home, tidying up after dinner. She paused by the window, gazing out at the quiet street. She felt an instinctive unease staring at the silent street but she couldn't pinpoint its source. Shaking of the feeling, she pulled the curtains closed.

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Sugimoto's team moved with military precision. One team set up surveillance around Natsue's home, while another prepared for extraction.

In the warehouse, Sugimoto watched as the operation unfolded on a monitor. His lips curled into a thin smile.

"Begin."

Meanwhile, miles away, Takahashi's phone buzzed with a work

notification. Glancing at the screen, he sighed, the little peace from having dinner from his mother earlier was already slipping away.

Little did he know, the fragile peace of his world was about to be shattered.

In the quiet of the night, a sinister plot had been spun—and no one, not Takahashi nor his mother Natsue, would escape unscathed.

□□□□□□□ ✧ MACHINATIONS ✧ □□□□□□□

It was the next day. Takahashi sat alone in his dimly lit office, his once neatly organised desk had become cluttered with reports and files detailing the latest operations that the intelligence department had been carrying out. The soft glow of his desk lamp cast long shadows on the walls with only the soft humming of the air conditioner serving as company for silence he found himself in.

Leaning back in his chair, he pinched the bridge of his nose as fatigue clawed at him. He had been carrying out intelligence related operations for Atsuomi for years. The work was fulfilling but relentless, and tonight it felt especially suffocating.

He glanced at the clock on the nearby wall—it was quarter past seven in the evening. Letting out a deep breath, he closed his eyes briefly as his thoughts wandered to the previous night, the warmth he felt whilst eating dinner with his mother still lingering in his heart.

His closed eyelids suddenly snapped open as he recalled the promise he made to his mother before leaving to return to his apartment.

'I said I would call her. If I don't I'm sure she'll worry about me. That's just how she is...'

It was a sentiment that Takahashi endeared but also filled him with concern. The unwavering care his mother showed him made him deeply appreciative—after all, he knew not everyone had the privilege of having such a loving parent. Yet, it also made him worry about how much she sacrificed for his sake, and whether he could ever truly repay her.

Moving through the corridors of the compound, he is met with the

same sterile room to undergo the routine security and cybersecurity checkups for all staff members, which takes longer than usual. They gave the excuse that some of their equipment needed to be rebooted before they could carry out the checks.

Walking along the familiar path to his car, he stopped at the same payphone that he used yesterday, ready to make the call to his mother, Natsue. A faint smile tugged at his lips as he typed in his mother's name. She always waited for his phone calls, even if it was just to say she was going to bed.

As the phone rang, he pictured her cheerful voice cutting through his exhaustion from work. It was a moment he looked forward to every day, no matter how chaotic his work became.

The first ring went unanswered.

'That's strange. She always picked up the phone immediately, even if she didn't know it was me who was calling her.'

He was expecting her to answer and start teasing him for calling so late like she usually did.

But the second ring stretched longer, and his faint smile faded.

The call went to voicemail.

Takahashi frowned, his mind immediately racing through the possibilities.

'Maybe she's really busy... or her phone's on silent.'

He tried again, only for the call to cut off after a few rings.

His stomach tightened. Something felt off. She never missed his calls, especially when he told her the previous day that he would call her.

'I'm overthinking this. She's fine.'

But the pounding in his chest told him otherwise.

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The chill of the evening bit into him as Takahashi Etsuo pulled up to his mother's modest home. The familiar porch light was off, leaving the house shrouded in darkness. His chest tightened and it felt like there was a lump in his throat.

'She always leaves the light on for me, even when she is about to go to bed.'

He parked hastily, barely notice the sharp snap of the car door as he shut it. The gravel crunched under his hurried footsteps as he made his way to the front door. His breath came out as fog in the cold air, but he barely registered it.

"Mother?" he called out as he unlocked the door with trembling hands.

The silence was suffocating and unnatural. He stepped inside, his nose quickly picking up the faint scent of spices from her cooking earlier in the evening, which still lingered in the air. But Takashashi didn't feel that warmth he was familiar with. His mother, who greeted him with her signature warm smile with every visit, was nowhere in sight.

His heart raced as he moved further into the house. Upon scanning the living room, he abruptly stopped in his tracks at the sight he witnessed.

A toppled vase lay shattered on the floor, its fragments laying ominously in the polarised moonlight from the opening in his curtains. The cushions from the sofa were scattered across the room as though someone had desperately tried to escape.

"Mother?" His voice cracked as he called again, louder this time, the unease he felt since the first phone call finally latching onto his vulnerable mind.

No answer.

He moved through the hallway, flicking on the lights as we went. Only the echoes of his footsteps could be heard amidst the painful silence. Every room he checked left his mind in further disarray. His mother's bedroom was untouched, but her coat and shoes were missing from the entryway.

By the time he reached the kitchen, his pulse was hammering in his ears. And there on the dining table, sat a single sheet of paper.

He froze. The paper stared at him, almost like it was taunting him. It was placed in the center of the table with care, as if whoever left it wanted to ensure it would be seen immediately.

His hand hovered above the piece of paper for a moment with great hesitation, as if touching it would make his worst nightmare come true.

With a deep breath and heavy heart, he finally snatched the piece of paper up, glancing at the words written.

The message written in bold capital letters chilled Takahashi to his bones.

"COME TO THE ADDRESS BELOW IN TOKYO. ALONE. IF YOU WANT HER TO LIVE."

Beneath it, an address was hastily scrawled in jagged handwriting.

Ba-bump* *Ba-bump* *Ba-bump* *Ba-bump* *Ba-bump

Takahashi's legs nearly buckled under the sound of his own heart beats. The paper shook violently in his grip as the weight of the words sank in. He clutched the edge of the table to steady himself, his breathing ragged as the emotions he usually kept under his stoic expression emerged.

"No, no, no..." he muttered under his breath, shaking his head as panic, fear, and anger swirled within him. His thoughts started to race.

'Who? Why her?'

Images of his mother's smiling face flashed in his mind. The memory of her giggles, her teasing, and her unconditional support pierced his chest like a dagger, opening the floodgates to a new emotion.

His jaw clenched as fury began to rise, overtaking the fear. Whoever did this had violated and stepped on the one thing that he held dear to his heart—his mother's safety.

But below that tremendous anger lay a rising guilt that threatened to swallow him whole.

"I should've told him," he whimpered, his voice thick with anguish. "I should've told Ayanokōji-sensei about her."

But he hadn't. He'd been too afraid of losing his position, too afraid of being seen as weak or vulnerable. His overprotective nature and inability to trust anyone with this secret had inevitably led him to this outcome. At least, that was the thoughts that were plaguing his mind.

Burning the address written on the paper into his memory, he bolted out of the house, slamming the door behind him. His car's engine roared to life, its powerful LED lights slicing through the darkness of the dreary night as he sped towards the address in Tokyo.

He gripped the steering wheel tightly to the point where his knuckles turned white. As he inched closer to his destination his mind gradually regained its composure, converging to a new goal—to do whatever it took to save his mother, no matter the cost.

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The address led him to a sketchy warehouse, its walls streaked with rust, planting a seed of unease in Takahashi's heart. Overgrown weeds and unkempt grass highlighted that it had been abandoned for a long time.

He glanced at his silver wrist watch—it was almost half past nine. He

had been driving for roughly an hour to reach the seemingly desolate warehouse.

Stepping out of his car with shaky steps, he made his way towards the metal door where he was met with a tall, gaunt man, wearing dark clothing that had been illuminated with a subtle yellow by the single lamp situated at the warehouse's entrance. It looked like the man had been waiting for some time given the puffs of smoke that left his mouth.

As Takahashi inched closer, the man's gaze left the cigarette, which was pinched between his right hand thumb and index finger, and sharpened on Takahashi, analysing him.

"Takahashi Etsuo?" the man asked, with a clipped tone.

Takahashi soundlessly nodded. His throat was too dry to speak from the stress of the situation.

"Follow me."

Leaving no rooms for questions, the man quickly turned away, walking towards the warehouse's entrance. With methodical precision, the man knocked on the door with a strange pattern.

Moments afterwards, the door ajar, whereupon receiving visual confirmation of Takahashi, opened wider, allowing both Takahashi and the man from the entrance into the old warehouse. Navigating through the dim hallways, they arrived at an open room that was well lit.

Two older men sat at a table, both adorning a flashy suit and polished shoes that glimmered under the ceiling lights. Takahashi's eyes slightly widened, recognition reflecting in his orbs as he gazed at the two men.

'Tch. I should've known. The only ones with a motive to move against me would be the likes of Naoe and Isomaru. Did someone betray me? Or did I get too complacent and the wrong person overheard? Well, no point thinking about that now. My priority is my mother's safety.'

"Takahashi," Naoe said, with a mocking smile plastered on his face.

"Welcome."

Takahashi gritted his teeth in frustration, clenching his fists as if he was ready to strike, but quickly regained his cool. He knew that if he lost his cool now his mother's safety could not be guaranteed. It was better to hear what they wanted before doing something so irrational. Afterall, Takahashi was Atsuomi's head of intelligence, it was his job to always to analyse events objectively without letting his personal feelings interfere. But there was no doubt that this would be Takahashi's most difficult test, and he couldn't help but let the question he desired an answer for the most to leave his lips.

"Where is she?" he demanded, his voice shaking despite his best efforts to stay calm.

Naoe's smile widened, not bothering to hide the malicious thoughts that were swirling in his mind, he gestured toward the man Takahashi had met at the entrance.

The man, Sugimoto, placed a tablet on the table, tapping the screen to provide a live feed of Takahashi's worst nightmare. In the feed, Natsue was sitting in a wooden chair, both her arms and legs, and mouth bound tightly. The cloth stuffed in her mound prevented any noise from leaking out. Her once bright golden hair that Takahashi remembered had now dimmed, dishevelled in messy strands and knots. She looked exhausted, but her green eyes still had a semblance of warmth, demonstrating that her spirit had not been broken yet.

Takahashi suppressed the sob that threatened to expose his weak mind, but the trembling of his hands did little to hide his true thoughts. The sight of his mother in such a poor condition made the weight of his guilt that much heavier. This was all his fault. He truly believed that to be the case. Even if someone betrayed him or it was his own complacency, if he had been transparent with Atsuomi there may have been a chance that he kept his job and his mother was provided protection.

Isomaru opened his mouth for the first time.

"She's unharmed...for now," Isomaru snarled, his words laced with malice.

Those last few words caught Takahashi's attention. Takahashi was no fool. He knew that Naoe and Isomaru were after something even though they kidnapped his mother, but that did not ease his thoughts. Because if what he thought they were thinking at this moment was true, then ensuring his mother's safety became exponentially more difficult.

Leaning forward with his smile fading, Naoe's gaze sharpened on Takahashi's.

"I'm sure you know what we want, Takahashi. You will work for us now, being our double agent to gather intelligence on Atsuomi. If anything sensitive crosses your desk, you immediately bring it to us in person. If you fail to comply...well I'll let Sugimoto inform you of what will happen."

Sugimoto chuckled darkly. "Well, Takahashi, let's just say that my men are always very 'pent up' and restraint is not something that is in their vocabulary. Your mother, even at her age, is still...quite lovely. I'm sure some of my men wouldn't mind having some fun with such a beauty, maybe they'll take her all at once?"

Takahashi's veins popped out of his forehead as rage consumed his mind. He fought the urge to strangle and **kill** Sugimoto, Naoe and Isomaru with his own hands. The thought of these men laying their hands on his innocent mother made his blood boil, but he was powerless.

He did not know where his mother was being kept and since his identity as an executive in Atsuomi's circle had been uncovered, Naoe and Isomaru would always be keeping a close eye on him.

"You're all monsters," he said through gritted teeth.

With a shit-eating grin, Isomaru leaned back lazily into his chair.

"Call us whatever you want. The bottom line is that you will work for us. Accept your new reality because you won't escape our grasp. After a threat like that, I'm sure you won't even think of betraying us."

The walls had closed in on Takahashi. He had never felt so trapped in

his life, so hopeless. Self-hatred polluted his thoughts as he once again cursed himself for not being more careful, for not telling Atsuomi about his mother sooner. For letting the greed of obtaining a high-paying position in Atsuomi's circle blinding him from protecting the only thing that mattered to him in this world.

'I have to obey them, if I don't, then—then they're going to do those unspeakable things to her. She doesn't deserve this...I'm such a fool.'

The worst part was that the future of being a double agent within Atsuomi's circle was bleak.

'Amongst the staff in my intelligence department, I had heard rumours about people disappearing from the organisation.'

The rumours spoke of tales in which people in Atsuomi's circle had disappeared mysteriously the next day. But Takahashi's position as a higher-up in Atsuomi's circle meant that he knew the truth.

Takahashi knew that those people who disappeared were in fact traitors that had betrayed Atsuomi. He had seen firsthand the agony that the corpses had been in before they left the world. The least gruesome sights that Takahashi had seen were the empty eye sockets in their skulls, fingernails missing from their fingers, and signs of toes having been severed.

'But there's one key difference that sets those traitors who got caught apart from me. And that's my unique position as the head of intelligence.'

Takahashi had the unique position of being the head of intelligence, which meant that he reported directly to Atsuomi. In other words, he was responsible for what information Atsuomi would hear and what information he would not hear.

'If I filter out sensitive information whilst still supplying sufficient information to not raise suspicion, I could pull the rug over Ayanokōji-sensei's eyes.'

If done carefully, Takahashi believed he could evade being caught as a traitor.

The thought of betraying the man who had granted him an

opportunity to achieve his dream sliced Takahashi's heart into pieces.

'This all my fault, yet it's Ayanokōji-sensei who will have to suffer for my mistakes. I shouldn't have taken this role.'

Self deprecating thoughts raged a storm within his mind, one that he couldn't escape as he spiraled deeper into the unsteady ocean that was leading a double-life.

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After telling Naoe and Isomaru the information he currently possessed, Takahashi walked back to the car. On the way to his car, the weather abruptly changed as drops of water started peppering his body. The cold of the water seeping into his clothes a direct contrast to the warmth he sought during his scheduled visits to his mother.

'Even if I managed to deceive Ayanokōji-sensei and follow Naoe and Isomaru's instructions to a tee, there is no guarantee they will keep their promise. As soon as they have accomplished what they want, my value as a double-agent would have dropped to zero. If I pick a different path and inform Atsuomi of the situation then there is no doubt that he will lose all the trust he had placed in me. Or worse, think that I'm lying and already perceive me as a traitor, thinking that it's a scheme to gain his trust.'

Although Takahashi respected Atsuomi, that did not mean he thought Atsuomi was a naive, kindhearted man. There had been moments when Takahashi had seen Atsuomi's eyes resemble that of a predator. A being that knew no compromise, only desiring to destroy what stood in its way or those who dared to aim their swords at his neck. Takahashi was currently a liability for Atsuomi and from an objective point of view, the best course of action would be to cut off the deadweight. Afterall, Takahashi's position as head of intelligence would not be difficult to replace. It was with these thoughts that Takahashi realised the truth of his situation.

He was the prey, and he had no way out in the lion's den that we

found himself trapped within.

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A/N: Hope you enjoyed the chapter!

V0 - Chapter 3: Another Player

Location: Shinjuku, Tokyo

A couple days had passed.

It was early morning and the sun had begun its routine ascent, lighting the dark which had reigned supremacy during the night. The quiet streets of Shinjuku had come back to life, as people prepared for their upcoming day, and the gentle hum of car engines filled the atmosphere of the waking city.

In a luxurious penthouse at the top of a high-rise building, a man was resting in his king-sized bed with a woman clinging onto him. Thin rays of the rising sun gilded his face, the subtle growing warmth across his face awakened him from his stupor. With a few blinks, his brown eyes turned to the woman next to him, before shaking her off from his arm and pushing the sheets off from his torso, exposing her once covered breasts to his gaze.

Turning his body to the right, hunching over the side with his palms flat on the silky white sheets, his brown gaze locked with the flashing screen of his phone that had been put on silent mode the night prior. The movement caused the woman to toss and turn slightly as her body sank deeper into the mattress with the shift of weight.

Picking up his phone, he scrolled through his notifications absentmindedly with an indifferent expression until a particular text caught his attention. It was from one of his most trusted subordinates informing the man that he would be visiting his penthouse early this morning today to deliver some important news.

"What's so urgent for him to contact me this early?" he muttered under his breath, his tone laced with a tinge of annoyance and curiosity at the reason behind his subordinate's message.

With a low sigh, the man, Ryosuke Tanaka, slowly lifted himself up from the bed, opening the nearby closet and grabbing the white robe that was perched on one of the hangers. He walked towards the large glass sliding door situated in front of his bed and drew the curtains to the side. Staring at the subtle reflection in the sliding door's glass revealed his grey hair, brown eyes, and a healthy constitution despite his old age of 71.

Upon drawing the curtains the young woman gradually woke from her slumber, rubbing her eyes before meeting Ryosuke's gaze.

"The money's on top of the bedside drawer. Make yourself scarce immediately," Ryosuke said coolly, whilst glancing over his shoulder, before turning back to the window.

Without a care in the world, she gracefully picked herself up from the king-sized bed, swiftly wearing the clothes that lay on the floor before picking up the money that Ryosuke had left on the bedside drawer. She carefully counted the money before turning on her heels and exiting the room, the sound of her heels clacking with the marble surface on the lower floor faded into the luxurious penthouse with the growing distance.

Ryosuke's thoughts soon shifted to the current political landscape of Japan, especially with the emergence of new players who he has to monitor closely to ensure the next election did not slip out of his grasp like it had last time. He was fully aware that the Peace Party's glory in the past had dwindled in the present era, even if they had maintained their status as one of the two major political parties in Japan.

Having been in the Japanese political game for many years, Ryosuke was a seasoned veteran in politics, always knowing the right words to say to win the favour of people. But with the appearance of contenders like Senator Kijima in the Citizens' Party, Ryosuke felt himself being pushed back with the times, his skills being rendered obsolete in the face of the new generation's talent.

This thought alone angered him a great deal. He had worked hard to obtain and maintain his position as a prominent politician in the Peace Party, scheduled to be their candidate who would represent the

party in the next elections. By using underhanded tactics to push out the younger generations from contending the position of party representative, and undermining the other old guards in his Party, Ryosuke had clawed his way to the top of the party as the undisputed leading individual to represent the Peace Party in the next election.

Pushing out the younger generation was a necessity in his mind. He perceived the younger generation as nothing but naive fools who did not have the wit to overturn the seniority system that had dominated Japan's politics for years. That was until he witnessed Senator Kijima's growth in the Citizens' Party.

Ryosuke wasn't a fool though. He was aware that the government had shown a lot of interest in the Advanced Nurturing High School, which Senator Kijima played a big role in establishing. Which is why he could not recklessly act against Kijima, especially given his reputation as the Citizens' Party 'golden boy'. So he had to hold off on making too many bold moves lest he get caught and plummet the already dwindling influence of the Peace Party.

But it wasn't Kijima who had been occupying his mind in recent times, it was a new name in politics that made him feel a great deal of unease. It was the enigmatic man, Ayanokōji Atsuomi, who had only recently made his debut in Japanese politics as a member of the Citizens' Party. When Ryosuke first saw Atsuomi, he planned on using him as a means of destabilising the Citizens' Party. Whispering sweet lies into his ears and manipulating his mind that lacked experience in the political world, aiming to cause chaos and disorder in the delicate dynamics that existed in the Citizens' Party.

Ordinarily, political parties generally wouldn't have more than two candidates who would compete to become the party representative. However, the Citizens' Party had four key factions—Prime Minister Miyako's faction, Naoe's faction, Isomaru's faction, and Senator Kijima's faction.

Despite having the party divided four ways, the party had been relatively free of scandals and blemishes that could damage its otherwise positive reputation among the Japanese people. The same cannot be said for the Peace Party, whose members have been involved in various scandals that have damaged the party's reputation

significantly. Of course, members who brought shame to the Peace Party were removed immediately, but the damage was done, making it harder for them to win the hearts of the Japanese people.

'But that man, Ayanokōji Atsuomi, trying to make a name for himself in the Citizens' Party is strange. My first impression was that he was a naive fool that I could easily manipulate. His generous donations to the youth, that were televised, telegraphed to me the pitiful methods he planned to use to try and increase his influence within the Citizens' Party. Those acts were what gave me that impression. However, this was not the case at all. That man's repeated rejections of my goodwill irritates me and tells me that he is not as naive as he portrays himself on television.'

Atsuomi's repeated rejections led Ryosuke to resent the man, vowing one day to enact his revenge and show the man the bitter reality of the seniority system that is still prevalent in Japanese politics, no matter how petty such an action may be. However, Atsuomi's strange behaviour had also encouraged Ryosuke to keep track of any further moves he makes in politics. He instinctively felt that Atsuomi was far different from the naive, kindhearted man who cared for the youth image that had been presented on TV, which was why Ryosuke felt slightly uneasy when he thought of the man.

The tapping of footsteps pulled Ryosuke out of his thoughts as he gazed at the man that had arrived at his door.

"Hasegawa, this better be important. You know I don't like it when people waste my time." Ryosuke said sternly to the young man dressed in a finely tailored suit, that accentuated his lean build.

Hasegawa Daiki was Ryosuke's most trusted subordinate, generally seen in the public with a suit and adorning a pair of thin-rimmed glasses to his otherwise sharp face.

"Yes sir, the information I have to report is quite distressing," Hasegawa responded stoically, his voice calm and professional.

Hasegawa fished a folded document out of his pocket, adjusting his glasses before he started relaying the intelligence he had gathered and sorted into a neat summary.

"I'll be blunt. The Naoe and Isomaru factions have temporarily joined hands," said Hasegawa with no hesitation, his voice clear and composed even if the information he had obtained from his underlings surprised him a great deal.

Ryosuke's eyes widened slightly before refocusing onto Hasegawa, gesturing with a firm nod to Hasegawa to continue his report.

"That's not all, but we found out that they have begun making moves against the new and upcoming Ayanokōji Atsuomi, who has recently been making headlines in the news for his magnanimous gestures for the youth and future generations," said Hasegawa, glancing at Ryosuke for a second before beginning the next sentence.

"Our intelligence suggests that Naoe and Isomaru recently kidnapped a 42 year old woman, Takahashi Natsue, whom we believe to be the mother of a member of Ayanokōji Atsuomi's upper circle based on the information our spies installed in the Citizens' Party acquired."

Ryosuke couldn't stop the vicious smile that formed on his face as devious thoughts swirled inside his mind.

'Hoh, hoh, hoh, it looks like Naoe and Isomaru are making bold moves. Seems like they're feeling the pressure from Senator Kijima's presence in the Citizens' Party. According to our last report, the Citizen's Party power has been shifting towards Senator Kijima's faction, especially given that Prime Minister Miyako has been obvious in his interest in Senator Kijima. They must have figured that they don't stand a chance on their own to push out Senator Kijima and thus formed a temporary alliance with two goals in mind. The first being to push Kijima out of the picture for who is going to be the party's representative, and the second being that they want to pool their resources to eliminate Atsuomi as quickly as possible. Hasegawa has really outdone himself this time. The spies we had installed in the Citizens' Party have finally bare fruit. The opportunity I have been desperately waiting for has arrived. Not only can I use Naoe and Isomaru as attack dogs for my revenge on Atsuomi, but I can also sacrifice them as pawns to serve as the perfect scapegoats, exposing them as criminals who planned Atusomi's assassination, dragging the Citizens' Party's reputation through the mud. And as a result, the Peace Party's influence will be bolstered. After all, a scandal on this scale being exposed to the public will be devastating for the Citizens' Party.'

As a plan of action formulated in Ryosuke's brain, his brown orbs locked onto Hasegawa's, as he uttered out his next orders.

"Hasegawa, get in contact with Naoe and Isomaru. Tell them in a cryptic way that we know what they're planning and we intend to 'support' them. Knowing them, they will immediately understand my intentions but will have no choice but to fold and bow down to my authority, lest they invoke the wrath of Atsuomi ire, since I could expose their scheme to Atsuomi."

Hasegawa's normally calm expression broke as he heard Ryosuke's response and quickly connected the dots.

"You plan to use Naoe and Isomaru against Ayanokōji-sensei?" Hasegawa asked, tentatively waiting for a response from his superior.

"That's not all, once Atsuomi inevitably falls we will frame Naoe and Isomaru as the masterminds behind the assassination." Ryosuke stated proudly, his smile widening with malice as he pictured the scenario in which the Citizens' Party crumbles and the Peace Party's influence rises all because of his brilliant scheme.

It was at this moment that Hasegawa was reminded why he forsake his ambition and lived for the sake of Ryosuke. His belief that Ryosuke would lead the Peace Party back to its glory days solidified.

"Understood sir, I will immediately begin preparations for the meeting and inform you as soon as I get an update," said Hasegawa, bowing loyally before exiting the room with methodical precision.

Upon Hasegawa exiting his bedroom, Ryosuke's gaze returned to the window, taking in the view of the sprawling city below illuminated by the orange from the ascending sun. His thoughts occupied by plans for the future.

'The Citizens' Party may have held the upper hand for the last few elections, but they have gifted me the means to make them bow before me. Kijima won't know what hit his party when the dust settles.'

He poured himself a glass of whiskey, taking slow sips with a satisfied smile slowly surfacing across his face.

"You will regret having rejected my generous 'support', Atsuomi," whispered Ryosuke, as his smile slowly faded, revealing the true depth of his dark thoughts.

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Location: Unknown

Kiyotaka walked with an upright posture, wearing the signature uniform of the White Room—a clean white gown extending to his knees. The faint smell of alcohol permeated in the enclosed atmosphere, a testament to the sanitation procedures the room had just undergone following the early morning physical training session which Kiyotaka had just completed. The physical education session was composed of three sections—cardiovascular training, strength training, and combat training. But given his recent feats in combat, Kiyotaka had recently begun training in various melee weapons.

Instructor Souya was guiding Kiyotaka towards the side of the White Room that held the cleaning facilities, a routine task to complete following physical training. They walked in complete silence down the white hallway, only the faint whooshing of the air conditioners served as company to Kiyotaka's ears.

Up ahead, the hallway divided into two paths, one leading to the cleaning facilities and the other was a door with a large label stating that only authorised personnel could venture through. Kiyotaka wondered what lied beyond that door but was not stupid enough to bother asking. Only fools don't learn from history which is why, in the past, Kiyotaka devoted himself to observing the misdemeanors perpetrated by his 'fellow' fourth generation students, storing the teachings in his head so that he would never forget them. Afterall, the smallest of mistakes in the beta curriculum could cost one dearly.

The whirring of the mechanical door revealed a polished, tiled floor that shined under the fluorescent ceiling lights. Kiyotaka glanced at the familiar large see-through chambers that lay ahead, approaching it with careful steps.

"Strip and proceed to Station One," ordered Souya, his tone indifferent.

Without hesitation, Kiyotaka swiftly removed the damp white gown, placing it into the chute on the wall, watching as it disappeared into the machine. A pneumatic hiss redirected his attention back to Station One, as the door started sliding open, revealing the polished steel interior structure of the chamber.

Upon striding to the center of the chamber, the Station One door closed with a loud clang. Kiyotaka stood perfectly still and closed his eyes as the familiar process began immediately. Jets quickly sprang to life with a whoosh, pelting him with water from every direction. The water was cold but he was used to it now. As the water jets were replaced with jets laced with disinfectant and soap, his mind wandered, thinking back to the earlier years when other subjects were still in his generation.

The White Room was all about efficiency, which is why subjects undergo an automated decontamination shower. Subjects are instructed to walk through chambers in equal groups, equipped with multiple water jets mixed with disinfectant and soap to clean them rapidly from all angles, subsequently moving onto the drying phase with high speed jets of warm air. If the instructors were feeling particularly 'friendly', they would turn up the pressure of the jets, which could cause some wounds to reopen. Although this would impact the overall performance of the students in their upcoming tasks, the objective of doing such an act is to condition the subjects to avoid injuries at all costs if they don't want to reopen their wounds during their daily mandatory disinfection. Since no one stopped the instructors, the lead instructor must have arbitrarily decided that such conditioning would be beneficial in the long run.

Kiyotaka was no different. He too had wounds because the instructors were relentless and he had not surpassed them at the time, however, they were fewer than his 'fellow' fourth generation subjects. He recalled the stinging feeling from the high-pressure jets and the sight of the floor being stained with red as wounds inevitably reopened. Some of the subjects couldn't bear the pain, especially when soap and disinfectant entered the vulnerable open wounds, their cries echoed in the chamber. But the instructors who watched through the cameras did not care, sometimes even increasing the pressure further, finding the children's anguish as music to their ears.

But not all of the fourth generation subjects were like this. The stronger fourth-generation subjects clenched their teeth and suppressed their screams, slightly wincing as the high-pressure jets bruised their skin.

However, some of the stronger subjects also saw an opportunity to use the soapy water and plan an attack. One boy that day decided to try his luck. He had grown resentful of Kiyotaka's success, which had inevitably severed other subjects from the fourth generation. Adding the machinations of the instructors who deliberately fostered an extremely competitive system, it was no surprise that he blamed all of his misfortune on Kiyotaka. Although violence against instructors was heavily punished, there were no rules that punished subjects from hurting each other.

Kiyotaka was no fool. He anticipated that some subjects might use this opportunity to blind him with the soap and assault him. Which was why his eyes were open wide and red. The sting of the soap irritated his eyes but Kiyotaka kept his eyes open no matter how much his body wanted him to close it reflexively.

Yet, the boy still attacked despite knowing that he had no advantage. The desperation in his eyes to survive, **to not disappear.**

But Kiyotaka had no sympathy in his 'heart' for those who bared their fangs against him. He had to carve one fact into the flesh of the other subjects. A fact they should accept if they don't want to end up like that young boy who tried to attack him during sanitation.

In the White Room, he was the predator and they were the prey.

Those who are weak will inevitably become victims to the strong. Showing them that harsh reality was necessary because he didn't have time for the petty attacks that they threw at him. They were a hindrance to his learning—to his growth. He couldn't have that or he too would disappear. So, that young boy became an example. An example of what would happen if they continued to misunderstand the power dynamics within the fourth generation.

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Finishing his scheduled sanitation, Kiyotaka was being led to a new room that he had not seen before, adding to the growing map of the interior structure of the White Room he had drawn inside his head. He pondered what could be the reason but ultimately came to one conclusion.

'It's a new module to test me.'

Accompanied by Suzukake Tanji, the head instructor in charge of carrying out the education of the beta curriculum's subjects, or rather subject, as only Kiyotaka remained, they ambled their way down the endless, sterile corridors of the White Room. Being escorted by Suzukake was strange in of itself. Usually a lower level instructor would lead Kiyotaka to and from his scheduled activities, indicating that something deeper was at play.

Kiyotaka knew that Suzukake was the head instructor and the one in charge of designing the curriculums for all generations. He had acquired this information based on the conversations he had heard when he was two years old. At the time, he could not understand what they were saying, however, he was able to perfectly memorise the syllables, sound and pronunciation of words that they uttered carelessly from their mouths. How could they have known that a mere two year old was capable of memorising entire conversations that he could not understand?

But after passing the four year old threshold for isolation training, it was difficult for Kiyotaka to come across any more information by eavesdropping on instructors conversing. He was only transported with only one instructor in tow, making it impossible to overhear any conversations because there was no possibility of a conversation occurring. And it wasn't like the emotionless and indifferent expressions of the instructors were exactly encouraging the subjects to interact with them. Kiyotaka had witnessed what happened to children who were too curious for their own good and not realising their place in the facility. Suffice to say, those children never questioned their superiors again after the gruesome punishment they

had to face.

Glancing at Suzukake with his golden orbs, Kiyotaka noticed the subtle microexpressions that Suzukake failed to conceal. Beads of sweat along his forehead despite the air conditioning, a stiff posture with tense shoulders, avoiding eye contact, and his lips that were drawn thin—all signs of nervousness, discomfort or perhaps even **fear?**

That unfamiliar yet familiar emotion led Kiyotaka to ponder the reason behind Suzukake's sense of aversion towards him, escalating to the point where it could be considered a response of fear. It was strange to Kiyotaka, wasn't this the same man who had created the curriculum in the first place? The man who had designed an education akin to hell—was afraid of what he had created. Suzukake must have known that Kiyotaka had no reason to harm him because doing such a thing would only bring demerits. It wasn't like Kiyotaka could escape either. As soon as a group of subjects tried to escape, a sleeping agent would be deployed and the subjects would fall to the ground pitifully. Yet, despite these facts, Suzukake still seemingly feared Kiyotaka.

Given how well information is controlled within the White Room, Kiyotaka could not know that the curriculum he had endured was never intended for a human being to be able to survive. Compared to the curriculums faced by newer generations with the objective of 'nurturing' even those with inferior DNA to the level of a genius, the beta curriculum's goal was very different. The fourth generation subjects who underwent the beta curriculum were lab rats, their only purpose was to generate data to support the construction of future curriculums and attract investors. If the subjects produced enough data for the first five years then it could be called a success, regardless of whether any subjects remained at the end or not. Kiyotaka's existence defied that expectation, shocking the foundations of the White Room and changing the course of its growth drastically.

But there was one thing Kiyotaka knew for certain. The fact that he was a **monster** in their eyes. He knew this because after his performance with a baton against a group of ex-professional fighters, the instructors had carelessly commented their thoughts upon witnessing what they thought to be inconceivable, not registering the

fact that Kiyotaka could hear every word they uttered through their bated breaths.

The memory of that time replayed in Kiyotaka's head

Six people lay sprawled out on cold, white tiles, some hunched over in pain, others unconscious. But all of them had something broken in them, that was a certainty. Kiyotaka had ensured as much by delivering blows to the critical points of the human body. Despite being outnumbered by six to one, Kiyotaka drove all of the ex-professional fighters to the brink of death. As he was about to deliver the killing blow by shattering their craniums, the loud protests of instructors entering the room stopped Kiyotaka in his tracks.

"""Stop! Stop!"""

They yelled for Kiyotaka to immediately cease his attacks. Kiyotaka, who had been known to strictly follow the orders of the White Room, complied, throwing away the black baton as a sign that he had no intention to continue his assault. Whispers quickly entered his ears.

"This shouldn't have been possible, I know it's him but he's still just a child..."

"Look at his eyes...there—there's nothing in them...it's like he's a living corpse."

"It's just like that other incident a few years back..."

"Sure, but that was a vastly different context—these are fully grown professional fighters who retired at an early age, not children..."

"He's a monster..."

One of the instructor's pointed at Kiyotaka, his eyebrows furrowed, and with an accusatory tone, he bluntly demanded an answer from the young boy.

"Subject G4-004, why did you take it so far!? What the hell were you doing?"

Kiyotaka golden orbs turned to the instructor. There was no spark in them. Nothing but an endless abyss of darkness. With an indifferent voice laced with confusion he said words that made the hairs on the instructor's arms stand on end.

"I was ordered to kill them. What's the problem with that?"

He could not understand the purpose of such a pointless question. They had ordered him to do it so he did. If he wanted to continue to grow, he had to surpass their expectations. The more challenging tasks became, the more potential he had of growing.

If you cease to grow then you will cease to exist. That was the fundamental law that they had doctored into his brain. As long as he didn't hit his limit, he wouldn't disappear. As long as he was the last man standing, he was the victor—**he was safe.**

As long as he had the means to protect himself then he wouldn't have to suffer the same fate as the other fourth generation subjects. That was what he told himself.

But as his mind drifted through this memory, it abruptly switched to another one, one that he had suppressed.

Seated at the desk closest to the long glass cabinet to receive the tray of food, Kiyotaka and Yuki had just finished eating their meal. Upon returning their trays, they had roughly five minutes before having to move to the next activity.

Kiyotaka stood in silence. His calm golden irises scanning the other fourth generation students. He knew they had been stealing glances in his direction. Looking for any weakness that they could exploit and overturn the harsh reality they were faced with—the risk of not making the new threshold point in the curriculum and disappearing. In their minds, if Kiyotaka's growth ceased then they wouldn't disappear because the curriculum would not ramp up in difficulty so quickly.

Amidst Kiyotaka's thoughts, Yuki was absentmindedly walking in circles around Kiyotaka, before coming to a stop next to him, scratching her arm whilst throwing glances at him. From an

outsider's perspective it looked like she was trying to get his attention.

Seeing her subtle glances in his direction, Kiyotaka realised that Yuki would not stop until she got an audible acknowledgement from him, thus, he focussed his gaze on her purple one.

"Do you need something?" asked Kiyotaka, his voice indifferent as always.

Upon hearing his signature indifferent tone of voice, a pout formed on Yuki's face, and she quickly fired back. "W-What? Can't I talk to you without a goal in mind?"

"Wouldn't it be a waste of time and energy if you didn't have a goal in mind?" inquired Kiyotaka, from his understanding there was no reason to converse with other people unless you had a specific goal in mind.

"You're the same as always...," sighed Yuki, her eyes cast downwards slightly.

At the time, Yuki had started talking more and more. Speaking in a different way from her original self. She talked to Kiyotaka more and more often even when she had nothing to say. He couldn't understand why she did such inefficient things.

Knowing that there was no demerit to conversing given that they still had a few minutes before their next scheduled activity, Kiyotaka could not hold back his curiosity to learn.

"Can I ask you a question?" quizzed Kiyotaka, his voice with a hint of curiousness.

Yuki, who had not expected Kiyotaka to initiate a conversation with her, was surprised. Her expression that was once downcast had quickly reversed, as a small smile unintentionally crept on her face, radiating a warmth that couldn't be found in any other room in the White Room facility. Her smile did not go unnoticed by Kiyotaka, who was still trying to figure out how to correctly carry out such a complex task.

"Yes?" asked Yuki, a tinge of a foreign emotion in her voice that Kiyotaka couldn't recognise.

"How come you're so great at conversing?" asked Kiyotaka, no longer bothering to hide the curiosity in his voice.

"What? How come I'm so good at conversation? I don't know," said Yuki, the small smile on her face faded, replaced by a contemplative expression.

"Then how can you smile? You just smiled earlier when I initiated the conversation."

"Why?...I don't know the answer to that either."

"Even though you're changing your expressions, you still don't know?"

"Because I can't smile right now..."

Upon hearing her response, Kiyotaka dived deep into his thoughts, trying to understand the meaning behind her words so that he could decipher the truth behind how she can show such emotions.

However, he was quickly fished out of his thoughts, as Yuki continued speaking.

"But I feel like I can smile again around you, Kiyotaka."

Kiyotaka shook his head lightly, prying the memory from his consciousness, shoving it into the depths of his long term memory.

'This is the second time. Why did I recall this memory? What was the trigger?'

Asking himself these questions was pointless because deep down somewhere at the bottom of his frozen heart, he knew the answers that he had learned on that fateful day, his subconscious mind refusing to confront them.

But he quickly pushed these thoughts down, focussing on beginning the next activity, as they had abruptly stopped at what was presumably their destination. The sound of audible footsteps inching

closer in the distance became more prevalent, indicating that someone else was approaching from behind them.

Suzukake's gaze met Kiyotaka for the first time, as he composed himself.

"Ahem, Subject G4-004, you will undergo your new training modules at this room from now onwards. Instructor Souya will be your escort," said Suzukake with a relatively calm voice despite the rigid tone and posture the words had been delivered with.

Kiyotaka nodded with indifference. After all, it was just another day in the White Room. But his ears perked up at Suzukake's next sentence.

"After completing your modules for today, you will go to the fourth visitor room, V-4. Your father has ordered your presence," said Suzukake, a hint of trepidation and curiosity mixed in his voice.

Kiyotaka's mind raced as he thought of what his father could have to say, his golden eyes shifting slightly.

'Well, whatever it is, I'm sure it is important. From what I know of 'that man', or rather my father, he does not like to waste time.'

He concluded as such based on their previous interactions. However, Kiyotaka couldn't help but feel like what his father told him today would be a **turning point** in his life.

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A few hours later.

In room V-4, Atsuomi was standing with a straight posture that matched the authority of his tailored suit and polished shoes that gleamed under the room's ceiling lights. His arms were posted behind

his back as he looked through the large one-way window that was in front of him. It depicted an empty white room that was being repurposed as a front to deceive future visitors or inspectors if the public ever caught wind of the facility's location. Afterall, the White Room staff could alter the activities carried out by the subjects to give a false impression to anyone who visits, making them believe that the education here is strict but not to the point where it is inhumane. Atsuomi had already done so a few years back when the White Room received their **first visitors**, although that time he had used the other visitation rooms. Of course, these weren't the only contingencies in place but they were enough.

Ordinarily, Atsuomi wouldn't have had any visitors for as long as possible. However, an exception had to be made in this case. The man who visited with his young daughter had helped him in getting in touch with various investors that had made the White Room project possible and one of his conditions was that he wanted to see the project for himself. They both shared a common goal—to lift Japan from its decline by improving the education system for the youth. But they had very different ideologies.

"Sakayanagi Narumori...he took over the position as chairman of ANHS around two years ago, succeeding his father," muttered Atsuomi.

Narumori was the man who had boosted the growth of the White Room by connecting Atsuomi to investors. Without his help, it would have been more difficult for Atsuomi to establish his organisation on the scale that it is today.

At the time of the visit, Atsuomi, who had been watching and listening to Narumori and his daughter, had concluded that although Narumori did not agree with the strict education system of the White Room, he didn't condemn it either. Despite Narumori being the chairman of ANHS, which was funded by the government and developed by Senator Kijima and his father, Narumori had remained neutral when it came to politics. Not picking any side, which was beneficial for Atsuomi to stay hidden.

But what Narumori could not know was that the tasks he saw in the White Room when he visited was just the tip of the iceberg. Atsuomi

had no intention of letting him know of the dark truth behind the facility, only as much as he needed to know for the sake of the deal they made years ago.

Atsuomi's train of thought was abruptly disturbed by the sharp knocking on the door, quickly recalling the meeting he planned with Suzukake to discuss the future of his son, Kiyotaka.

"Enter," he said coolly, not bothering to turn his back, his gaze continued to stare off into the distance.

Suzukake entered carefully with stiff shoulders. Although Suzukake had worked under Atsuomi for years, he still felt nervous in Atsuomi's presence, gifted with the knowledge that others didn't know about him meant he knew what Atsuomi was capable of. Following this line of thought, he couldn't help but compare both father and son in his mind.

Taking a seat on one of the couches in the room, Suzukake faced Atsuomi, who had now turned around, leaning forward with his arms resting on his thighs, fingers interlocked. The tapping of Suzukake's foot perfectly reflected the nervousness that was brewing within him.

Atsuomi sat down on the leather recliner opposite him, his eyes poised on Suzukake as he cut straight to the purpose of meeting.

"I'm planning to take Kiyotaka outside of the White Room," stated Atsuomi, the nonchalance was palpable in his voice, as if he didn't care about the significant implications his statement had.

Suzukake's face morphed into one of shock, his lips forming an 'O' shape as if he couldn't believe what he had just heard.

"What—why now Ayanokōji-sensei?" quizzed Suzukake, his voice laced with curiosity.

Atsuomi mirrored Suzukake's posture, leaning forwards slightly as his eyes took a more firm stance.

"Some of the investors across the country want to personally see the results of the White Room project for themselves before they even consider giving away money. I'm certain that once they see Kiyotaka's

abilities first hand they will not hesitate to show support for the project," explained Atsuomi, his voice tinged with a hint of satisfaction. Before Suzukake could respond, Atsuomi continued the reasoning behind his decision.

"Given your position as the Head of Curriculum Development for the White Room, and the lead instructor for the fourth-generation curriculum, I thought it would be best if you shared your thoughts on the matter," stated Atsuomi, as he leaned back into the recliner awaiting Suzukake's response.

Suzukake had overcome his initial surprise and quickly started to analyse the implications of exposing Kiyotaka to the real world by considering the observations he had documented about Kiyotaka.

'It is becoming increasingly more difficult to test Subject G4-004's limits. Whatever we have thrown at him he has inevitably absorbed. Once he grasped the fundamentals of any of the teachings, he applied it flawlessly, generating impeccable results that no other subject from any of the other generations could come close to matching.'

The White Room was originally designed to provide a full education from birth to adulthood. Kiyotaka, who had been placed in the fourth generation, was never meant to complete the entire beta curriculum course. The curriculum was only theoretically designed to maximize the difficulty, going beyond the original ten level system that Suzukake had created. It was never meant to be implemented, however, the White Room staff could not reject the orders given by Atsuomi. Suzukake knew the curriculum was reckless. He had hoped that all the children would fail to meet the threshold for tests. That was because in the case that a child managed to survive such a rigorous education, then that child could no longer be a human being —rather, the child would be a **monster**. This was what Suzukake believed.

Which was why everytime Suzukake looked at Kiyotaka, he could help but think of him as a monster. Someone who had defied all odds to stand at the top of the fourth-generation mountain that was the beta curriculum. Suzukake could not prevent the primal feeling of fear he had when he glanced at the young boy, however, because he was a proud, professional researcher, he did his best to bury these

feelings.

But the thought of carrying out nearly nine more years of education for Kiyotaka made Suzukake distressed. He knew in his heart that Kiyotaka would outgrow the White Room, which meant that his growth would eventually plateau. As a researcher, the thought alone depressed him, his goal was to determine the boy's limits but how could he if those limits are not measurable by the White Room's standards?

Yet, this was not what concerned Suzukake the most. It was the fact that he couldn't prove why Kiyotaka hadn't dropped out from the beta curriculum and continued to survive. Was Kiyotaka's monstrous ability to adapt, build upon, and absorb skills a product of the rigorous education system he designed or was it a genetic mutation? Suzukake couldn't rule out either possibility, which was slowly driving him crazy, especially because Atsuomi had told him to try and replicate the results that Kiyotaka produced.

'However, exposing Kiyotaka to the real world will inevitably expose him to new stimuli and information that could not be learned in the White Room, providing a diverse avenue to extrapolate his growth. But this could also have a negative effect. The environment cultivated in the White Room is carefully controlled to optimise results that the subjects will produce. On the other hand, the outside world is a lot more chaotic and disordered. It could impair Kiyotaka's cognitive abilities or lead him to develop bad habits, at least from the perspective of the White Room's philosophies. Although, in the end, it is Ayanokōji-sensei's decision on what Kiyotaka's future is. As a passionate researcher, I would personally like to see him standing in my shoes, nurturing future generations to reach new heights, heights that I hadn't seen with my subjects. Alas, if Ayanokōji-sensei desires Kiyotaka to walk the life of a politician, then the development of a minimum level of emotions may be necessary. In that case, rapidly changing the environment could yield positive results, even if it's temporary. Furthermore, taking Subject G4-004 outside the facility for sometime can give me a proper amount of time to produce a new curriculum that can properly test him when he returns to the White Room.'

Collecting his thoughts, Suzukake's eyes now focussed back on Atsuomi's, ready to deliver his conclusion.

"I believe the positives outweigh the negatives. Giving Kiyotaka early exposure to the outside world could help stimulate his inevitable transition to society once his education is complete in the White Room, especially if he goes down the path of a politician. Although there are risks where he could be influenced to rebel against the White Room, Kiyotaka, for the most part, has never disobeyed orders. Considering the incident with the baton, he shows no hesitation in carrying out the tasks that we give him. As long as we are careful in what he is exposed to it should not be an issue," explained Suzukake with confidence, but something nagged at him from the back of his mind. It was the question as to whether Kiyotaka was as emotionless as he seems.

Entering this line of thought, Suzukake couldn't help but recall a particular anomaly that had occurred a few years back when he was analysing the trendlines for the data produced from each generation.

*'Upon Subject G4-005's **forced departure** from the White Room, Subject G4-004 appeared to be unaffected, showing no signs that he was emotionally distraught after her departure, fitting the framework of what we had observed of Subject G4-004 since the start of the fourth-generation. However, shortly after G4-005's departure the rate of increase in Subject G4-004's results surged. Consequently, the bottom four subjects in the fourth-generation did not meet the new threshold set for the curriculum, and following those four dropouts, the rate of dropouts increased significantly as well. Did the increase in Subject G4-004's performance have a connection to Subject G4-005's disappearance? Or was it just a coincidence that Subject G4-004's output increased after her removal from the program?'*

Suzukake had designed the beta-curriculum such that the difficulty would ramp up depending on the score of the top ranking subject in the fourth-generation. In other words, as long as the top result did not meet a certain threshold, the difficulty would not increase drastically.

'From what I and the other instructors observed from watching Subjects G4-004 and G4-005, they appeared to be at the very least acquainted. But based on their short conversations, it was mainly Subject G4-005 who talked whereas Subject G4-004 remained relatively quiet and indifferent to her presence. Although they were the only two who interacted with each

other with the remaining subjects steering clear of them, calling them close would be stretching the truth. It would be more accurate to say that Subject G4-005 continually decided to interact with Subject G4-004 and Subject G4-004, for the most part, remained indifferent to her presence. Hence, in my opinion, it is more likely that the surge in output of Subject G4-004 was a coincidence, especially given that his growth only hastened from that point onwards. But I can't rule out the other possibility. More importantly though, Subject G4-005's behaviour does not match with what I would expect from a fourth-generation subject.

It was a fascinating observation for Suzukake. He had designed the curriculum such that students would be conditioned to think rationally even in the most stressful of situations, always prioritising their own wellbeing. From Suzukake's point of view, for the best chance of survival, Subject G4-005 should have stuck with the group's majority. Yet, Subject G4-005 went with the irrational choice and chose to interact with the top student, Subject G4-004, who had been ostracised by the other fourth-generation subjects.

'Did she feel a sense of kinship with Subject G4-004? Or was it another emotion? The thought that she could feel such an emotion even in an environment as harsh as the beta-curriculum ignites my passion as a researcher to find out more, but alas, according to Ayanokōji-sensei, she is no longer a concern for the White Room anymore.'

Before Suzukake could ponder any longer, Atsuomi's sharp voice caught his ears.

"Good. Any further suggestions?"

Upon being asked for his input, Suzukake thought about the best way to slowly integrate Kiyotaka into the normal world. If he was going to meet investors it perhaps may be best to let him live in the real world for at least a week before travelling across the country to meet prominent investors. Appearing like a lifeless doll in front of the investors could invite unwelcome thoughts.

'Even though it's unlikely that one week would have a profound impact on Subject G4-004, it would still be better than sending him to meet important potential investors without proper preparation.'

This would also give the man time to fully formulate a challenging curriculum for Kiyotaka to undergo for the next nine years, including this year. Whether such a thing could be done in just weeks of time was a logistical nightmare for Suzukake but he had to do it. From the data Kiyotaka has been generating, Suzukake predicted that the new temporary modules that he had created weren't going to last very long before Kiyotaka inevitably absorbed all of the teachings.

The biggest problem with this idea was that for all the years that Suzukake had studied the boy, he could not decipher what was truly going on in his head. On face value, they had evaluated Kiyotaka as someone who always follows orders, no matter what, and had rigorously tested for its confirmation. Afterall, all students in the White Room were indoctrinated to never bite the hands of their owners, and he had remained obedient throughout his education. That was Suzukake's thoughts.

'Also, Subject G4-004 remained indifferent even during the virtual reality program that we implemented when he was the only one remaining in the White Room.'

Mustering up all his courage, Suzukake met Atuomi's eyes, relaying his proposal.

"Perhaps we could expose Kiyotaka to the outside world for an extended period of time before travelling across the country. Maybe keep him in a relatively remote location but still exposed to the outside world," suggested Suzukake, hesitation sprinkled in his voice. He did not know how Atsuomi would react to such a suggestion.

"Your reasoning?" said Atsuomi, his voice taking on a colder tone. His golden orbs stared at Suzukake like a predator would stare at its prey. Beads of sweat started to roll down Suzukake's neck. Getting on this man's bad side was not on his bucket list.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Suzukake proceeded to recount his earlier thoughts, laying out his reasoning, observations and key considerations.

"..."

Seeing no reaction from Atsuomi, he couldn't stop his heart from beating rapidly, anticipating a harsh reprimanding—that was until the fierce expression on Atsuomi's broke into his usual stoic one with a hint of contemplation.

"Our thoughts align. Kiyotaka will leave in a few days."

Atsuomi wasn't a fool. He knew that he wasn't good at everything, just like any other human being. Limitations were inevitable. But that's why he made up for his shortcomings by collecting talented individuals, like Suzukake. Listening to their expert opinion was necessary to help him make the correct decision. But it was also important to never get complacent which was why Atsuomi always pressured them to receive an honest, realistic opinion rather than sweet words to comfort his 'heart'.

Suzukake breathed out a sigh of relief, his body returning to homeostasis—until Atsuomi continued speaking.

"But by the time he returns to the White Room I expect you to have completed the design of his new curriculum."

Suzukake's heart sank, picturing the long hours of work he had cut out for himself for the next two weeks.

'He really is reasonable but unreasonable at the same time. However, without him, my life as a researcher would have been finished.'

That was why, despite Atsuomi working Suzukake down to the bones, he still admired Atsuomi for he had brought hope to Suzukake's passion as a researcher, and Suzukake wasn't alone. Countless other staff had a deep admiration for the man despite fearing him at the same time.

Suzukake's thoughts were quickly disturbed by the sharp knocking on the door.

'That must be Subject G4-004. He must've already completed his training...'

Suzukake's hypothesis was correct. Kiyotaka would continue to devour the training modules that Suzukake had administered to buy

him more time.

Atsuomi's powerful voice followed shortly after. "Enter," demanded Atsuomi, his authoritative tone making the atmosphere tense in anticipation for the reunion between father and son.

****

A/N: Hope you enjoyed the chapter.

V0 - Chapter 4: A Spark

Location: Unknown

It was lights out for the students of the White Room. Curfew had long passed but one young boy's golden eyes were still wide open despite the pitch black darkness he lay in. The flow of his thoughts were turbulent, as he tried to piece together the deeper meaning behind the contents of the meeting that had occurred a few hours ago.

Resting under the cool white sheets with his head dipping gently in the soft fabric of the pillow and only the faint hum of the air conditioner to occupy the silence, Kiyotaka couldn't help but replay the memory of the 'conversation' he had with his father just hours ago.

Just like always, the atmosphere trembled with tension every time the father and son met, to the point where even the oppressive, sterile walls of the White Room could be considered friendly. Their golden eyes would entwine, one pair had long lost the twinkle of innocence a child should possess and the other whose ambition transcends the chains that society tried to bind him with.

"Have a seat, Kiyotaka," Atsuomi ordered, his voice devoid of warmth that would be expected from a father reuniting with their son. But their relationship, if you could even call it that, was far from the normal father-son dynamic common in the world beyond the White Room's walls.

Nodding with his usual blank expression and shifting with methodical steps, Kiyotaka took a seat next to Suzukake, resting his palms just above the knees, legs shoulder width apart, and his dull eyes in line with Atsuomi's.

"..."

Suzukake was sweating bullets, shuffling away from the young boy, unconsciously beginning to drum his fingers along the arm rest of the leather sofa in response to the uncomfortable silence that followed their 'friendly' greeting.

"It seems you've been doing well in your recent training modules, Kiyotaka, to the point where you have attracted the attention of potential investors across the country, some of which have very deep pockets," stated Atsuomi, his eyes carefully observing his son, looking for any sliver of a reaction from the expressionless boy.

But Kiyotaka sat resolutely, the distant look in his eyes reflected indifference, showing that Atsuomi's words did not move him in the slightest. After all, Kiyotaka knew that the man in front of him saw himself as nothing but a tool to use to bolster the White Room's reputation as an institution that produces brilliance from even the most inferior DNA. Given the background of his mother and father, Kiyotaka fit the bill of being the perfect candidate for the White Room's education. The ideal test subject to gather more data to refurbish the future curriculums into a perfect education system that will raise Japan's status from the ditch it found itself declining to.

There were no familial feelings between the two, the only acknowledgement of such a connection was the blood that courses in their veins. Kiyotaka was indifferent to his father's existence. Years of conditioning individualism into Kiyotaka's mind had driven him to only value his own survival, prioritising becoming self-sufficient. In other words, the only thing the boy could trust was his own abilities, nothing else.

Kiyotaka's father's praise or perception of the young boy in question was of no concern to Kiyotaka. The only thing of value in Kiyotaka's mind was absorbing more knowledge and increasing growth. After all, if you fail to grow you cease to exist. That was the fundamental law, at least in the fourth-generation curriculum, of the White Room. Kiyotaka wasn't sure how the other generations operated. He knew of their existence only by name.

He had witnessed countless children hit their limit in the past who disappeared the next day, never to be seen again. No trace of them was left behind, even their desk would disappear.

This was not the only method behind the fourth generation subjects disappearing. There was another method.

As a consequence of the extreme competitive environment that the White Room staff cultivated in the fourth generation, some students employed methods to eliminate other students, using any means necessary. Whether it be sabotage, psychological attacks or use of brute violence, the White Room staff showed no sign of stopping the children, only until specific children were in critical condition. Although this could be seen as a counter-productive method, the White Room staff looked at it differently. The beta curriculum was never supposed to be completed by any child. In their eyes, those who fell earlier were unable to adapt—they were weak. Which is why they had no reason to stop the children. However, this did not mean other generations had to undergo such treatment.

For example, the fifth generation put emphasis on communication as the specialisation, encouraging social skills and team building. The White Room staff did not deliberately encourage competition amongst them as there would always inevitably be competition for the position as the top performing student in the fifth-generation. There was still a set threshold for students to reach if they wanted to remain in their curriculum, but they would never have to witness the horrors that the fourth-generation students had endured.

Kiyotaka, who had faced the beta curriculum, was no stranger to the attempts made on his life. The most infamous case was during the night.

After students had left isolation training, they were forced to live together in the same room, bunking in pairs of two. Students had formed a temporary alliance to eliminate the biggest threat—Subject G4-004, Ayanokōji Kiyotaka.

Kiyotaka was no fool. He understood the nature of the environment he found himself in and that there was only one thing he could trust —himself. Which is why he showed no mercy when they pointed their blades at his throat, subsequently driving them to their destruction.

However, this solidified one single fact in Kiyotaka's mind. If he was

weak, he would become the prey. The fourth generation was a world of the survival of the fittest. To survive, he had to do whatever it took to stand and maintain his position at the top of the curriculum. And the only method to accomplish that was to always seek growth. Improvement.

Which is why at that moment, Atsuomi's 'praise' didn't move Kiyotaka's heart. Why should it? It's not something he should dwell on or think about—nothing but a distraction from absorbing more teachings that the White Room has to offer.

Just like Atusomi saw Kiyotaka as a tool to further his ambitions, Kiyotaka saw the facility as nothing more than a training ground to grow and obtain self-sufficiency.

That was Kiyotaka's thoughts at that moment, but the following words that left Atsuomi's mouth opened up a new possibility for Kiyotaka.

"In a couple weeks you will be accompanying me to meet said investors. Before that, you will be staying in one of my safehouses in the outside world, reading various materials to prepare you to inevitably interact with potential future investors, showcasing proper respect and dignity," said Atsuomi, his voice full of conviction, leaving no possibility for argument.

Upon hearing such a controversial statement, Kiyotaka managed to control his facial expression through sheer will power, maintaining the signature doll-like expression that he had been wearing for years.

Japanese philosophers said that human beings have three faces. The first face is what we show to the world. A public image or how we portray ourselves as to avoid being judged or to be able to fit in with others. In other words, a fabrication of who you really are. The second face is the one we reveal to family and friends, a relatively more true reflection of who we really are as individuals. We are able to trust them with knowledge of some of our true feelings and thoughts. And the third face, which is one you don't show to anyone. It is a perfect replica of who you really are on the inside. The bottom line is that we are not the same person at any point in time. We change how we act depending on the situation and who we interact

with.

Kiyotaka had yet to reveal any of his other 'faces', only portraying the persona of being a mindless follower of the White Room. He knew that he only had one advantage in an environment that he could not control, and that was his ability to control the White Room staff's perception of himself.

As the years passed till he was the only one remaining, Kiyotaka understood his significance in the White Room from a tactical standpoint. The more he excelled at the tasks he was given, the higher his value within the facility would become—the less likely he would disappear. However, despite this, Kiyotaka knew that he had no control of his fate in the White Room. Their orders were absolute. If they wished to dispose of the young boy they could do it in a heartbeat.

When faced with such a bleak future, most people would crumble and fall, breaking down never to function again. The thought of having no control can do that to people. But not Kiyotaka. Once he understood this cruel truth, he devoted himself to ensure he maintained the image of a loyal hound that the White Room could control-there was no other choice if he wanted to survive.

If you try to rebel against the White Room staff you become an example for future students. An example to teach them of what would happen if they dare to resist authority.

Kiyotaka realised this quickly and did his best to hide the inner workings of his mind. He learned that trying to escape the White Room was impossible without significant help from the inside, and even if he escaped what good would that do? He didn't know how far his father's reach was. Therefore, from Kiyotaka's perspective, behaving and following the White Room's commands was more advantageous than showing resistance. If he shows that he is subservient, and blindly follows the White Room orders, then he is more likely to survive. Additionally, the more he dutifully follows instructions the more trust they have in Kiyotaka. That trust can create variables in the future that Kiyotaka can use.

That was why, despite the reveal of an opportunity to see the outside

world that danced in front of the young boy's golden eyes, he restrained himself. He couldn't risk revealing an ounce of his inner workings to the man in front of him because he did not know what Atsuomi had planned for him in the future.

Although Kiyotaka had seen pictures of the outside world, through the virtual reality program that the White Room had implemented once he was the only one remaining in his generation, his heart was not moved. One reason for this was because he couldn't be certain what he saw in virtual reality was a true depiction of reality.

But the primary reason was that he couldn't afford to dwell on thoughts that he initially deemed impossible. Seeing what lied outside the white walls, with his own eyes, was a childlike dream that he had locked away, deep in his heart. Occasionally the thought would pass through his mind but he would suppress it immediately, knowing that it would be a poison that would fracture his mind. He told himself to remain indifferent to the colours he saw in virtual reality—that it was the best course of action if he wanted to survive. He couldn't afford to fall from the mountain that he had been climbing his whole life.

Hence, Kiyotaka was sure that his decision to maintain the carefully crafted facade of being an obedient subject was the correct decision.

'But...why did I doubt this decision at that time?'

His train of thoughts had inevitably led him to think of that fateful day from a few years ago, but he had no time for those thoughts. He had to act as the perfect soldier.

"Understood, sir," responded Kiyotaka, his voice devoid of emotion, as if the idea of seeing the outside world was trivial—inconsequential to him.

"..."

Atsuomi just stared at him in silence. He looked as if he was deep in contemplation, after witnessing Kiyotaka's 'reaction'.

"You are dismissed, Kiyotaka."

The memory ended there, but Atsuomi's words still lingered in Kiyotaka's mind.

"Seeing the outside world, huh...," he muttered under his breath, tasting the words, trying to make sense of the new sensation. All his life he had only known the tall, sterile walls of the White Room facility. Each day felt the same to the point where it would be easy to lose track of time as the same mundane days replayed for years. Loneliness was something he had gotten used to during his isolation training. More so when the other students turned their backs on him.

Although he had decided to hide his true thoughts from the White Room staff, the boy didn't truly believe that such desires would come true, that he would ever get to see the outside world. But Atsuomi's proposal had opened a new pathway for the young boy.

Deep down, Kiyotaka felt there would come a day where his growth would stagnate in the White Room, where there would be nothing left to teach the boy. When such a thing occurred, what was the purpose of the young boy's life from that point? What reason did he have to live for? He had endured day-by-day in the cruel fourth-generation curriculum with only one purpose-survival, achieved by always seeking growth.

That was the only goal that mattered in the White Room. As long as he didn't cease to grow he wouldn't disappear. He would be the victor, he would be safe. That was what Kiyotaka constantly told himself.

'But...'

Maybe, just maybe seeing the outside world would change his perception. Teach him new things that could not be expressed within the white walls of this facility. That it might give him another reason to live.

Kiyotaka did not know, but in that moment his dull, cold eyes reflected a flicker of warmth. A tiny spark—forgotten but not lost. Time would only tell whether that ember will flourish to a blazing fire or be extinguished.

Location: Tokyo

On the following day, in a more secluded part of Tokyo at an abandoned warehouse, two older men dressed in dark coats were seated in comfortable chairs that stood out in the worn-down room, their arms resting on the sturdy table. The thick concrete walls with peeling paint were lined with men adorning sharp-looking suits, their shoes gleamed under the large industrial ceiling lights whose luminance had dwindled over time, a testament to the aging compound.

With arms crossed behind their backs, the suited men stood completely still on behest of the orders from their superiors, scanning the room.

Windows of the single-story building had long since been boarded up, obstructing outsiders from seeing the criminal activity that occurred within the deteriorating building.

"Takahashi's report came through," said Naoe, sitting at the head of the table, staring at the report trapped between his fingers. He slid the thin folder across the table to Isomaru, who sat directly across from him.

"A trip? With his son?" Isomaru said upon reading the first sentence of the report, his voice with a hint of surprise, disbelief and annoyance.

"I didn't even know Atsuomi had a child, did you Naoe?"

"No," Naoe replied curtly. He had already read the report but his mind was still in disarray, processing the new information they had obtained. The details that their double agent, Takahashi, had provided them was both simultaneously useful and distressing.

"The fact that Atsuomi has kept the boy hidden this whole time tells us one thing: the kid is important. Possibly even a weakness that we could exploit in the future."

Isomaru nodded his head, silently agreeing with Naoe's words as he

continued reading the report from Takahashi. Meanwhile, a storm raged within Naoe's mind as he navigated the knowledge that Takahashi had gathered for them.

The fact that the information regarding the existence of Atsuomi's son had been kept guarded for so long and not having been revealed was surprising and unsurprising to Naoe. Given that Atsuomi had been hiding under his nose and slowly growing his influence convinced Naoe that he was capable of keeping his actions out of the public ear, operating perfectly in the shadows.

Naoe's own ignorance did not help either. If he had not been arrogant and wrote off Atsuomi's existence as a meaningless variable that would be extinguished the moment Naoe cut him off then Naoe's plans may not have gone up in smoke. Alas, Naoe's assessment of Atusomi being an insignificant variable was completely wrong given Atusomi's emergence in the political world as a politician affiliated with the Citizens' Party, picking up supporters.

Given that the information that Naoe had received from Takahashi was new, he believed that his judgement of blackmailing Takahashi, who was Atsuomi's head of intelligence, was the right decision. After all, in just a short time, he had learned what he believed to be a critical weakness of Atsuomi.

'I can't believe that man had a child.'

Naoe couldn't believe that Atsuomi had brought a child into the world, but the chance of this information being false was practically impossible. Considering the intel that they had gathered on Takahashi, they knew he would never risk his mother's safety, especially knowing what they had threatened to do to her. Furthermore, Naoe knew that there was no way Takahashi would go to Atsuomi for help. Based on how Naoe perceived Atsuomi to operate, he concluded that Atsuomi would ultimately cut ties with people who were no longer useful to him. Therefore, if Takahashi told Atsuomi that he had been compromised then Takahashi would become a liability and probably disappear the next day.

'Anyway, although this is new information, I doubt it will be of any use yet. More importantly, the purpose of the trip Atsuomi plans to take is

more of a concerning matter.'

"Wait, Atsuomi is planning to go across the country to visit investors? And what's this "White Room"?"

Isomaru couldn't hold back the bewilderment in his voice. White Room? What could that possibly be? And finding new investors across the country? What could they be investing in? Was it related to this 'White Room' that Takahashi mentioned?

Those were the questions that haunted Isomaru's mind, casting a dark shadow over his face as he pondered the dire situation that he and Naoe found themselves in.

Naoe was no different. The bitterness he had felt earlier when he had read the report had returned. He couldn't help but lament the decision he made years ago due to his own weakness. If he had just killed Atsuomi when he had the chance, all these variables that were appearing now would never have occurred.

'That single mistake has cost me dearly. It seems this "White Room" is what Atsuomi has been working on since we went our separate ways and is probably the source of funding that I tried investigating with the two journalists who went missing. Takahashi says that he only knows the name the "White Room" and that it is a facility, but doesn't know exactly what its purpose is or where it is located due to how well information is compartmentalised within Atsuomi's circle.'

For a moment, Naoe considered the possibility that Takahashi may be withholding information but quickly discarded this idea. Just like earlier, he concluded that there would be no benefit in Takahashi doing such a thing. After all, he did not know what condition his mother, Natsue, was in nor where she was located. He wouldn't take any risk based on what they knew of Takahashi's personality and relationship with his mother given how he reacted when they threatened her.

'It's frustrating. The information Takahashi has provided is no doubt useful. I don't think I would have the resources to collect such intelligence.'

Even after forming a temporary alliance with Isomaru, their allied

factions were still losing supporters due to the increasing influence of the Kijima faction. More and more people, who used to follow either Naoe or Isomaru, are jumping to Kijima's side, sensing they would gain more benefits from joining the Kijima faction. This meant that Naoe and Isomaru were rapidly running out of time to make their moves to restore their lost influence and power.

Even though the next election for Prime Minister was still a few years away, the fact that they were losing supporters was not a good sign.

By the time the elections were around the corner, Naoe and Isomaru would not have enough influence or support to even contest the position of party representative. Their original goal of pushing Kijima out of the race for party representative and then duking it out amongst each other for the position of party presentative would be impossible if they had no supporters left.

Unfortunately, for Naoe, his worries did not end there based on the intelligence he read in the report.

'I'm guessing these investors across the country are interested in this "White Room" project that Atsuomi has kept hidden from the public's eye for years. Given that he is now openly making moves, his recent emergence in politics can only mean one thing. He desires the position of Prime Minister of Japan.'

Naoe was convinced of this thought after he had seen firsthand the limitless ambition in the young man's eyes when they broke off their relations.

'If Atsuomi also joins the fray as a candidate for the party representative then it will become even more difficult to suppress the Kijima faction.'

He would have to fight a war on two fronts. One waged against Atsuomi and the other against Senator Kijima. However, this was not the reality yet. Although he and Isomaru were both losing supporters, after combining together, they could pool their resources to suppress Atsuomi then proceed to consolidate their new found power, preparing for their inevitable battle with senator Kijima. That was Naoe's thoughts.

Thus, in Naoe's mind, the priority was to stomp out the unexpected variable—Atusomi's emergence in politics.

'If I don't eliminate Atsuomi immediately, then he will be able to secure what I would assume to be a large amount of funds from these prominent investors, who he plans to visit in a couple weeks while travelling across the country.'

This was a huge problem for Naoe and Isomaru. If Atsuomi acquired enough funding from the investors who are located across the country, then it would become exponentially harder to suppress him in the political world. One of the most important resources when you want to run as a candidate for party representative or even position of Prime Minister is **money**.

Campaigning is very expensive, and individuals who are interested in running for the position of Prime Minister will require lots of money if they want to stand a chance of winning. Naoe and Isomaru, whose resources were slowly dwindling, would be at a major disadvantage if Atsuomi acquired funding from prominent investors across the country. After all, they can't be 100% certain that the sole purpose of travelling across the country is to secure investors for the "White Room"—it's just a conjecture. They can't deny the possibility of him meeting people who are willing to help fund his future campaigns.

Additionally, Atsuoimi acquiring the position of Prime Minister of Japan would be beneficial to the investors so it wouldn't be unfavourable for them to give funds to funnel into campaigning.

'However, although the political world is looking worse day-by-day for myself and Isomaru, the situation is not hopeless, yet. We're fortunate to have obtained a double agent who is responsible for personally collecting and reporting intelligence to Atsuomi.

Naoe believed he still held the advantage. He could use Takahashi to pull the rug over Atsuomi's eyes whilst he slowly plotted the man in question's downfall. This new piece of information where Atsuomi was planning a trip across the country could be used to his advantage to stage an assassination.

'If I can stage this assassination whilst keeping my hand in the act hidden,

I can regain the initiative and consolidate my power.'

But, for now, Naoe couldn't carry out any plans until he received a detailed itinerary report regarding Atsuomi's travel plans. All he knew was that a couple weeks from now, Atsuomi would be travelling with his son to meet prominent investors across the country.

'Takahashi said that he will be able to get a more detailed itinerary report closer to the day of travel. He estimated that the information would be ready in three days' time.'

Of course Naoe wasn't completely unreasonable. He understood that plans could change quickly, which is why he ordered Takahashi to keep him updated on any changes. The drawback to this was that the risk of Takahashi being exposed would increase given they would have to increase the frequency of contacting one another.

But Naoe and Isomaru did not have a choice as they had been driven into a corner. This was their only chance and they had to take this gamble if they wanted to stand a chance against Senator Kijima in the next election for the party representative of the Citizens' Party.

"Not all is lost, Isomaru. Once we receive more detailed travel plans we can create a proper plan to eliminate Atsuomi."

Isomaru, who had composed himself after the revelations, nodded his head in agreement. Realising that this was their only option. To bide their time and collect more intelligence and then plan an assault.

Naoe wondered for a moment if he should leak the intelligence he learned to the public but quickly discarded that thought after thinking deeper about it.

'If Atsuomi has maintained careful control of information for this long then in the event that said information is suddenly released to the public, he would undoubtedly suspect a traitor in his organisation, compromising Takahashi. Furthermore, he will be more cautious now since those two journalists that I sent were snooping around the source of his finances. Therefore, leaking the name "White Room" to the public would be the worst move to make.'

When Takahashi explained the structure of the intelligence department, Naoe quickly understood the limitations of using Takahashi as a double agent.

For starters, previous intelligence that had been collected and scribed into reports is carefully controlled by the head of cybersecurity whose identity was unknown even to Takahashi. Therefore, any request to see previous information without a very good reason would be denied, and the request would be logged. Especially any information pertaining to illegal activity.

Even though Takahashi is the director of intelligence, he would still be flagged for suspicion very quickly. This means that Naoe has to rely solely on new information that Takahashi obtained and stored in his long-term memory. Unfortunately, for Naoe, such information can't be used as leverage because there would be no physical evidence to corroborate it in the first place. Furthermore, since Takahashi was responsible for collecting and reporting critical information to Atsuomi, if said intelligence leaked to the public then Takahashi would be compromised.

'Which is why I can't afford to leak the information that Takahashi gathers. There is also the fact that revealing such information wouldn't do a lot of harm and could easily be covered up given there is no physical evidence to support the claims. Regardless, we are being forced to take a reckless action, in the form of an assassination, due to the time constraints that Atsuomi's planned trip has imposed on us.'

Whilst lost in thoughts, the door to the abandoned warehouse creaked open, revealing Naoe's right-hand man, Sugimoto, who had a strangely pale face.

For as long as Naoe had known Sugimoto, he was always calm and collected, driven by logic without letting emotions cloud his judgement. But seeing that eerie look on his face caused unease to creep under Naoe's skin.

"Sir, I've received a message from Ryosuke of the Peace Party," said Sugimoto, hesitation present in his voice as he carefully closed the door behind him.

Naoe stiffened, various dark thoughts clouded his mind upon hearing the name Ryosuke.

"Ryosuke? What does that old snake from the Peace Party want?" Naoe snarled, the malice dripping from his words could not be missed.

Sugimoto swallowed the lump in his throat, trying to dissipate the nervousness that had started brewing within him as he glanced at the cold expression that covered Naoe's face.

"He said he'd be happy to assist us with our recent ambitions, offering to meet with us tomorrow. That was the only content in his message."

Naoe quickly shot up from his seat, the movement producing a large audible sound as the chair scraped against the hard concrete floor.

"Assist us? He's not fooling anyone. That sly man is fully aware of our plan. I'm almost certain that he will be angling to use myself and Isomaru as his pawns to take down Atsuomi and the Citizens' Party," Naoe said, slamming his first on the table with a face contorted in rage as the veins in his forehead bulged.

An outsider who was missing context would think that Naoe was jumping to conclusions but they would be wrong. Ryosuke had known to loathe the Citizens' Party, and had in all his time in politics never offered help. Why would he? They're in opposing parties.

If that wasn't enough for Naoe to suspect that Ryosuke had caught onto the plan that he made with Isomaru, then the fact that Ryosuke said he would assist them with their "ambitions" was enough. It was well known for a long time that Naoe, Isomaru and Kijima were looking at the Prime Minister's seat with Ryosuke being no exception. Why would Ryosuke offer assistance to their "ambitions" when such a thing would contradict Ryosuke's own goals? And why specifically add the word "recent"?

Naoe knew exactly why and quickly deduced that Ryosuke was aiming for something else entirely.

Isomaru leaned forward with a dark expression looming over his face.

"But if we refuse Ryosuke now, he will definitely inform Atsuomi of what we've been up to and we will lose the only opportunity to equalise. He knows that we can't risk that which is why he is being so shameless with this provocation," Isomaru stated, clicking his tongue in annoyance, realising that they had been driven further into the corner that they had already found themselves in.

'Ryosuke is no fool either. He carefully delivered that message with enough hints for us to deduce his intentions without exposing himself. Although his message made no mention of knowing that we kidnapped Takahashi, I'm almost certain that at the very least, he is aware that we blackmailed someone high up in Atsuomi's circle.'

Naoe gritted his teeth in frustration, it looked like his plan to use Takahashi as a double agent had quickly blown up in his face.

'We had kept this operation underwraps, but it seems that one of two scenarios have occurred. Either one of my subordinates betrayed us, or one of Isomaru's aides sold us out. Although I took the reins for the plan, instructing Sugimoto to carry out the kidnapping, Isomaru still provided manpower to assist. Regardless, the situation is looking very grim.'

The identity of whoever had betrayed them was of no importance, for now. Naoe and Isomaru would have no choice but to cooperate with Ryosuke. Even if they tried to rebel against Ryosuke's orders and plan a counter-attack, depending on how high up the alleged mole's ranking is, any move they make could be exposed, leaving them in a hopeless situation.

'However although the situation has turned dire, I can possibly still squeeze out some value from this dreadful situation. If I appear to be cooperative with Ryosuke, I can use his resources to eliminate Atsuomi. Meanwhile, if the spy is within my circle, I'll only inform those who I can trust with absolute certainty, like Sugimoto, keeping any signs of resistance a secret. Only then can I make a move on Ryosuke and try to frame him as the mastermind behind Atsuomi's assassination.'

Concluding his thoughts, Naoe subtly glanced at Isomaru, who returned his gaze with a similar look, indicating that Isomaru had similar thoughts. After all, the two were originally old rivals who were very familiar with each other's methods and thought processes.

'Isomaru will probably do the same and I can trust that he is competent enough to know how to use this grim situation to try and make a comeback. But even so...'

The odds were stacked against both of them. They knew even with a plan their chances were slim-but they had no choice. The worst part was that even if they tried to plot Ryosuke's demise, if they weren't careful, then any preparation made would be inconsequential since Ryosuke would already be aware of them ahead of time due to the alleged presence of spies. To add insult to injury, if Naoe's subordinates or Isomaru's subordinates learned that there was a mole amongst them then the seeds of doubt would quickly be planted in their hearts. Slowly sprouting disorder and tension amongst them.

Naoe's anger slowly simmered as his mind reached a conclusion.

'For now, both of us have to appear cooperative with Ryosuke, using his wealth and resources to increase the probability of us eliminating Atsuomi. From there we can look for a way to retrieve the advantage and backstab Ryosuke.'

That was the only plan of action that Naoe could formulate given the dire circumstances that he found himself in.

After a long moment of silence, Naoe's eyes locked with Sugimoto's.

"We don't have a choice. Contact Ryosuke and tell him we're willing to meet tomorrow under any conditions he lays out. But make no mistake, that snake is not our ally."

Isomaru, who had also calmed down, nodded his head in agreement.

"I will begin the preparations, sir," replied Sugimoto, quickly leaving the room with methodical precision, showcasing that he too had also calmed down.

Naoe and Isomaru exchanged a tense glance at one another, the unspoken thoughts passing between them. They both knew that the game they were playing had extended into dangerous territory. Every move they made had to be calculated and carried out with delicate precision, hiding their hand from the new player who had entered

the fray.

For now, they both had similar ideas in mind to use Ryosuke to their benefit and had begun constructing various plans in their heads. But both of them knew that the tide had ultimately turned against them, and they needed to navigate the storm with utmost caution lest they get lost at sea.

□□□□□□□ ✧ MACHINATIONS ✧ □□□□□□□

Location: Unknown

Timeline: A few months ago

In a different facility that was not the White Room, buried deep within the mountains, a man in a long white lab coat, seated on his chair stationed at his desk in his personal laboratory, was going over various top-secret projects he had been contracted to carry out. But on this particular day, he was preparing to report his progress to his boss, Atsuomi, who was visiting the facility today.

His eyes glazed over the three-dimensional, interactive, projected hologram on his screen, showcasing the various prototype models including their corresponding name, purpose and specifications.

A red flashing light appeared in the corner of the man's eyes, an indication that someone was trying to contact him. Rolling across the smooth, tiled floor in his wheeled chair, the man pressed a button before speaking.

"Yes? What is it?"

"Sir, I have just been informed by the pilot that the boss will be arriving in approximately 10 minutes at the top floor helipad.

'Oh, shit.'

"R-Right, I'll head straight up immediately," said the man in the long white coat before cutting off the communication line.

After slowly lifting himself up from his comfortable chair, he corrected his shirt collar and dusted off any residue stuck on his coat

before beginning to brisk walk towards the elevator.

The corridor was silent on this floor. Walls were lined with rock from the mountain and reinforced with steel and concrete foundations. Only the sound of his own heels clicking with the tiled floor could be heard in the otherwise silent space.

Kuromiya Renji had been working within these walls for several years and had gotten used to the silence. He was a slim man in his mid-forties with sharp features and black hair that was combed back. Chosen to be the lead researcher at this black-site, his task was to establish and develop advanced technology for various purposes. Spying, espionage, infiltration, weapons design, advanced medical equipment, and anything that would be beneficial to his boss and their external clients. Renji was a man that was passionate about technology, looking to innovate and create new devices that could help Japan in any way. That was his motivation in life.

But today, that passion that burned deep within Renji's heart had been replaced temporarily by a sense of nervousness. The man Renji was meeting always made him uneasy. Whether it was his overwhelming presence or his golden gaze, the bottom line was that Renji would always feel uncomfortable in the end.

However, this was only a slight discomfort. The truth of the matter was that Renji secretly respected Atsuomi a lot, to the point where it could be called admiration. Atsuomi was the one who had seen potential in Renji and brought him into the program, allowing him to explore his passion with no restrictions. Which is why Renji was forever grateful.

And because Atsuomi had hired Renji, all the technology that he had innovated was far beyond the current world's standards, at least as far as they knew. For example, the three-dimensional interactive hologram device was just one example of how far ahead in time the technology that Renji developed was. He truly was a genius to the point where any country would desire his engineering prowess.

But because of that, this particular facility had to be kept absolutely top secret. None of the executives in Atsuomi's circle were aware of the facility's existence, after all, Atsuomi was known for playing

things very close to the chest. So, for security purposes, everything that occurred in this facility was highly classified and restricted.

Arriving at the elevator doors that had been padded with the reinforced steel, Renji swiped his master-level key card at the keypad, a privilege he had obtained as the lead researcher at the facility.

The elevator doors opened with a gentle hiss before subsequently closing. Selecting the top floor, Renji waited in silence.

'I wonder if he will be pleased with the progress my team and I have been making in the requests that he had put forth weeks ago.'

Just a couple weeks ago, his boss had requested him to work on various technological projects. A lot of them were ones that their prominent clients had contracted to his boss who in turn transferred the work to Renji.

'His latest request was for very small discreet electronic devices that were capable of recording both video and audio.'

These were not the only requests, but this request in particular was labelled as a priority.

Just as Renji was about to ponder about the other projects, the gentle hiss of the opening elevator doors brought him back to the real world.

Swiftly exiting the elevator, he proceeded to the main entrance, awaiting the arrival of his boss.

The entrance of the black-site was made of two large, reinforced blast resistant doors that opened via two separate security mechanisms—a single keypad and retinal scanner which were both kept safe behind a lightweight but high strength sliding panel. Guards clad in plain, unmarked uniforms with stoic expressions were posted at the doors. Their impeccably precise movements and sharp gazes suggested years of special training—most likely part of elite units from the past.

Following Renji typing in the relevant security code into the keypad and scanning his retina, the sound of moving pistons, springs and machinery could be heard.

CLANG

The large mechanical doors rumbled back to life, slowly opening to reveal the open air.

In the distance, high in the night sky, a sleek black helicopter was flying towards the facility, subsequently landing on the helipad, bathed in yellow and red, perched outside the reinforced blast doors.

Amidst the whirring sound of the helicopter blades that gradually dwindled, the pilot of the aircraft got out of his seat before opening the passenger doors.

A man dressed in a finely pressed suit and tie slowly descended from the helicopter door. His brown hair, that was combed back, gently fluttered from the cold breeze passing through the mountainous terrain.

With graceful steps, the man strode towards the entrance, his golden eyes sharpened on Renji.

"Welcome, Ayanokōji-sensei, I have some good news to report to you," Renji said, his voice full of a mixture of politeness, respect and nervousness as he gently gestured to Atsuomi to follow him.

Proceeding back to the elevator, Renji began to recount the status of the project that Atsuomi had requested and labelled as a priority.

"Regarding the covert listening and audio devices that you wanted designed and prototyped; I have come up with various different models that you can utilise."

"Good. I want to see all of them before I make my final decision," Atsuomi stated, his voice tinged with a hint of satisfaction upon hearing Renji's success in completing the delegated work in time.

A pause followed before Atsuomi continued.

"What is the status of the patient?" Atsuomi inquired, turning his head slowly, eyes narrowing onto Renji.

"A-Ah, yes, patient zero who was brought in a few years back. Zero is

doing well in the experimental medical pod. Injuries fully healed months back and Zero is receiving sufficient nutrients to sustain physical growth whilst remaining in artificially induced sleep (AIS)."

"Good."

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Arriving at a large observation room that depicted a well insulated laboratory, various researchers could be seen operating equipment that went beyond what even most wealthy governments could obtain. There was no doubt that this facility was well ahead of its time technologically.

Gesturing towards the first set of prototypes, Renji picked up the closest one and presented it to Atsuomi.

"These miniscule cameras and audio recording devices can be positioned anywhere with a magnetic surface. Despite their small size, they can easily grip onto metallic surfaces to deliver steady footage and clear audio. For example, they could be positioned underneath a table, behind a picture frame, or even a vehicle," Renji explained, a hint of pride in his voice as he presented the device to his superior.

Atsuomi took in Renji's worlds before falling into a pit of contemplation as he carefully considered the prototype Renji had shown him.

"Its applications are limited but overall, it could prove to be useful. Not a bad result."

Hearing that Atsuomi was satisfied with his first prototype, Renji felt his confidence boosted a little.

"I also managed to construct audio and recording devices that are disguised as lenses or glasses," Renji boasted, the confidence instilled in him from Atsuomi's previous words was palpable, as he carefully

picked up the prototype glasses from the stand they had rested on, handing them to Atsuomi.

Atsuomi's curiosity surged as he picked up the glasses. "How does it work?"

"If you push back on the bridge of your glasses once whilst wearing them then whatever you see and hear is transmitted in real time as encrypted data directly to our servers. Repeating the gesture and lightly tapping your right temple will turn off the feed," Renji explained, his voice sprinkled with hints of excitement.

Atsuomi inspected the glasses closely before refocussing his gaze onto Renji's face, "And what of the encryption protocols?"

"They are impenetrable by current standards. Even if they somehow got into the wrong hands, we have ensured that no data can be extracted without the corresponding decryption key, unique only to this facility," Renji assured Atsuomi.

A small smile broke out on Atsuomi's face momentarily before quickly being overshadowed by his usual stoic expression.

"And what of the other projects?" Atsuomi asked, as he placed the pair of glasses back on the original stand, positioning his hands behind his back.

"Regarding the larger scale surveillance project, we have managed to miniaturise the listening devices, allowing us to monitor conversations long distances away."

Atsuomi raised an eyebrow whilst looking at Renji, prompting him to elaborate.

"The versatile targeting software we use allows us to focus on very specific sound waves in the air, allowing us to reconstruct sound waves with the smallest of amplitudes—in short, nothing will escape our ears in the defined range. However, the biggest benefit of this device is that no equipment has to be physically implemented at the location of interest, eliminating the risk of discovery."

Atsuomi began lightly rubbing his goatee, contemplating Renji's

words.

"And what is the exact range?" Atsuomi asked, with an inquisitive tone.

"Our current version of the prototype allows us to listen up to one kilometer in an urban environment. However, this range can be extended if there are less obstacles to disrupt the transmission of the sound waves. But the converse is also true. We're still working on improvements to increase the average range."

With a curt nod, Atsuomi proceeded to walk towards a large monitor depicting a blank monitor, currently depicting a white screen.

"And what of the AI? What is its current status?"

Renji's expression turned to one of excitement. He turned to the blank screen that Atsuomi was staring at.

"Cypher," stated Renji, his voice taking on a more authoritative tone.

The screen flashed as pixels of orange materialized onto the blank canvas, forming an abstract collation of thin circles. A calm voice emitted from the screen.

"Greetings, I am Cypher."

"As you can see, we have been able to teach the AI to interact with humans as well as follow orders. It can also accurately replicate human voices and with enough training, eventually be able to tamper with audio files and video files without leaving any traces. We are also training it to assess risk in strategies when provided with sufficient data and plan to integrate it into the larger scale surveillance projects."

A hint of curiosity flickered in Atsuomi's eyes as he leaned forward slightly towards the screen, staring at technology that would no doubt shake the world if it were released. Outwardly, though, he maintained the dignity a superior should have to their subordinate.

"And what about the other capabilities that I told you to prepare?" Atsuomi probed, as his head turned slightly over his shoulders, his

golden eyes gleaming at Renji for a response.

Renji quickly straightened his posture, taking a few steps closer towards the AI residing on the white screen.

"Ahem—Regarding the additional cybersecurity capabilities you requested, we have completed 50% of the training and learning we scheduled for the AI to undergo. In its current state, it can predict, recognise, and dismantle malicious malware before any existing antivirus or firewall. Furthermore, any malicious software we have fed it, the AI has relentlessly destroyed, absorbing any new knowledge that could be useful to stop future attacks. However, at this moment, it is more like a glass cannon, only capable of destroying malware but not protecting itself from attacks. If the malware's purpose is to destroy the AI rather than infect the server then it is vulnerable. Which is why the remaining training is devoted to protecting itself from attacks."

Atsuomi's expression turned sterner whilst observing Renji. Renji could help but look away from his piercing gaze.

"Don't forget the significance of this AI. Amongst completing other assignments, it will be instrumental to ensure the longevity of this facility, protecting it from various attacks that I have no doubt it will suffer from in the future."

Protecting the intellectual property and classified documents that reside in the facility was one of Atsuomi's greatest priorities. If he truly wanted to raise Japan from the decline it found itself in and compete with top nations around the world, then he had to hide all the advanced technology from foreign influences.

Renji looked back at Atsuomi, his eyes blazing with a new fire of determination to not fail his superior.

"Of course, Ayanokōji-sensei. Now, I'll show you the projects that my team and I have been working on for our external clients."

Walking towards another pair of industrial style doors that were reinforced and vacuum sealed, Renji swiped his master-level keycard on the keypad, subsequently raising his right palm towards the

biometric security check perched next to the door.

PSSHT

The doors opened up, slowly opening from the middle outwards, revealing an assortment of small-robotic devices shaped like a spider. Technicians were currently testing its movement capabilities but their attention was quickly caught by the opening of the vacuum sealed doors.

"""Sensei, welcome back!""" They chanted in unison, bowing their heads with stiff movements.

"Raise your heads, don't mind my presence. Kuromiya will be debriefing me on the specific details," Atsuomi ordered.

A mixture of admiration, respect and fear was present in their eyes as they raised their heads, nodding with blank expressions before continuing on with their work.

Atsuomi and Renji walked towards an empty testing pod, containing a monitor, desk, chair and one spider-shaped robotic device.

"I assume this is the infiltration project?" quizzed Atsuomi, after witnessing the small spider-like robots manoeuvring easily across walls, up heights and jumping long distances.

"Yes, you're correct Ayanokoji-sensei. We have successfully built a prototype that can easily plant surveillance devices, jam communication frequencies, and even administer lethal doses of poison such as hydrogen cyanide or alternatively, poisons with a longer incubation period. Currently we control the robotic-spider infiltration units, or 'Spyder' units, as I like to call them, via long-range remote control software on the computers. The software establishes a secure connection with the 'Spyder', encrypting the transmitted signals to prevent them from being turned against us. Additionally, there is a self-destruct mechanism that is locked behind a long passcode that we only possess. One of our external clients, that being the JSDF, has shown a great deal of interest in this project."

Upon hearing the last words, Atsuomi's gaze hardened.

"Make sure you give that general from the ministry a friendly reminder that these technologies are my organisation's intellectual property. Anything they intend to use from us will be carried out under my terms, not theirs. They are the ones who are frothing at the mouth at the thought of acquiring such technology. We hold the advantage in negotiations, if they don't comply we can always sell to others," his voice taking a darker tone, emphasising that he wouldn't compromise.

Renji's face stiffened momentarily as he was reminded of one of the reasons that those who worked with Atsuomi developed a sense of fear towards the man. His uncompromising attitude often made people uncomfortable. People wondered if that attitude would get him in trouble but never has such a case occurred. Those who openly opposed him disappeared from the face of the Earth shortly after.

Swallowing the bundle of nerves and hesitation that prevented his voice from escaping, Renji glanced at Atsuomi, "R-Right, of course, Ayanokōji-sensei. General Shirogane has been for the most part cooperative, and has consistently provided funding from the JSDF. But I'll make sure that he understands his limits, sensei.

General Shirogane Hanzo. A high-ranking officer within the Japanese Self-Defence Force (JSDF) and a veteran that has held various leadership positions throughout his career in the JSDF. He is now currently responsible for overseeing the integration of technologies to further Japan's defence infrastructure. Atsuomi and Shirogane had met through a shared contact and established a mutually beneficial relationship, administering highly classified contracts to acquire technology that Atsuomi's facility had made available. As their relationship progressed, and Shirogane saw the value in the technology from Atsuomi's facility, he used his authority within the JSDF to funnel chunks of the JSDF's black-budget as well as money from the Defence Ministry towards Atsuomi's research and development of technology.

Concealing Atsuomi's involvement in the facility was naturally a condition that Shirogane had to follow. But the process of concealment has an element of complexity.

Firstly, a 'foreign' front organisation establishes a series of

interconnected shell companies, that were created and named under a generic names, registered as genuine businesses that specialise in defence technologies and research consulting.

General Shirogane within the JSDF approves the legitimate contracts, and procures the necessary funds through official government channels like the Defence Ministry or the JSDF's black budget, disguising it under the pretext of "national defence".

Given the autonomous structure within the JSDF, their budgets are rarely questioned and even when they are, supplying "national defence" as the justification is enough to shake off any curious eyes, even gazes from those in high positions of power. Which is why it was the perfect cover. As a result, any government officials including the Prime Minister himself would just see the distribution of funds as just another defence contractor within the saturated market, effectively pulling the rug over their ignorant eyes and allowing Atsuomi's operations to fly under the radar.

Due to the JSDF having a highly compartmentalised structure, all information related to the technology from the facility is on a strictly need-to-know basis, making the possibility of leaks close to improbable.

The best part about using "national defence" as the pretext for approving and funding projects is that projects that are labelled with "national defence" are easier to procure funds for. Thus, making it more beneficial for Atsuomi who can use the money to fund the research facility and his other operations like the White Room with the extra profits.

So, in short, even if caught, there is no physical evidence of Atusomi's hand in the creation and operation of the facility. Of course, given Atsuomi's nature, he doesn't completely trust Shirogane which is why overtime, he has acquired various forms of blackmail, ready to deploy and weaponise against Shirogane the moment Shirogane gets too greedy. But as it stands now, their relationship is mutually beneficial and they maintain a decent relationship even with Atsuomi's uncompromising attitude. Well, this and the added presence of their mutual contact who they had acquainted with one another through.

"And what of our other clients? What is the progress on their projects?" Atsuomi queried.

Renji's eyes snapped back to Atsuomi's. "Yes, let's proceed to the projects our other clients are interested in. But afterwards, I have some new ideas that could be worth exploring, especially with regards to the human brain and body, at least if you're interested."

"Only if there is enough time."

"Understood, sensei."

Although Atsuomi was providing and developing advanced technology to his clients like the JSDF, that did not mean the technology he would provide would be superior to the devices he installed in the White Room or kept hidden. He wasn't foolish enough to give weapons to those who could turn their backs on him at a moment's notice or sell themselves to foreign influence. Of course, Atsuomi still had various contingencies, such as blackmail or backdoor override programs, prepared in the event of one of his clients overextending themselves. Not realising that once they get caught in Atsuomi's web, there is no escape.

But Atsuomi's ambition did not end with creating superior technology. Once the White Room achieves its goal, the students who leave the facility, after undergoing an education that was honed to perfection form the years of testing in the past, could proceed to join leadership in government positions or even leadership in the military or JSDF.

The goal the White Room strived to achieve was to obtain an efficiency rating that was as close as to 100% as it could be. Essentially minimising the number of dropouts from the White Room and maximising the number of successful subjects. Atsuomi knew it would take quite some time to reach that point. But he predicted that perhaps the integration of advanced technology could prove to be a catalyst that could shorten that long and arduous journey to the ideal he sought in his head.

'This country will rise from the trash it is descending towards, with myself at the forefront. I don't care what methods I have to use or sacrifices I

have to make.'

That was Atsuomi's firm resolution as he walked with Renji to witness the other projects, his eyes blazing as the sparks gave way to an endless fire of ambition.

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A/N: Hope you enjoyed the chapter.

V0 - Chapter 5: Rebirth

Location: Tokyo

In a more secluded part of Tokyo, a group of men, resembling bodyguards, were dressed in tailored suits, lined up against the barren walls of a decommissioned factory.

The rusted machinery, equipment and conveyor belts were unfasted and pushed to the back of the abandoned factory, leaving a large open space where a steel table stood, illuminated by the refurbished ceiling lights.

"Sir, we have received the latest input from Naoe and Isomaru. They will be arriving shortly, alone as we instructed them to be," Hasegawa said whilst adjusting his glasses.

"Very good. What is the status of the sweep?" probed Ryosuke, lightly scratching his stubble whilst looking at Hasegawa from the corner of his eyes.

"We've just finished swooping the facility. There doesn't appear to be any foreign listening devices or recording devices. We can safely proceed with the dealings."

"Excellent," Ryosuke said with a tinge of satisfaction in his tone, as a grin quickly surfaced on his face, hiding the malice bubbling within him.

'It seems Naoe and Isomaru know their place within our future partnership.'

Ryosuke deliberately told Naoe and Isomaru ahead of time the exact meeting location to see whether they would try and place a trap for him. Planting listening devices to get a confession out of Ryosuke and then carefully editing out any parts that implicate themselves was

something that Naoe and Isomaru would be capable of, at least in Ryosuke's mind.

'The fact they didn't take such actions means they're desperate to take down Atsuomi, so much so to the point where they would align themselves with an enemy such as myself. It seems my bluff worked. If they knew that I had been trying to manipulate Atsuomi from the start they may have seen through my plans.'

The truth is that from the start, Ryosuke had no intention of informing Atsuomi that Naoe and Isomaru were working against him and plotting his downfall through blackmailing one of his executives. Ryosuke wouldn't gain anything by doing such a thing. After all, he has been trying to 'recruit' Atsuomi, since Atsuomi's emergence in politics, to begin his plans in destabilizing the Citizens' Party, allowing the Peace Party to prosper. In his mind, giving Atsuomi free information would be a foolish mistake. Why should he stop Naoe and Isomaru from eliminating Atsuomi? He can use them to eliminate Atsuomi, relieving his grudge against the man. Nevertheless, Ryosuke pushed these thoughts away because he predicted that Naoe and Isomaru would accept his 'assistance'.

'Based on the intelligence I have received from Hasegawa, I know that Naoe's faction and Isomaru's faction are still losing influence and support within the Citizens' Party, double so with Atsuomi's and Kijima's presence. As a result, their resources, manpower, and control is slowly depleting, making it more difficult for them to carry out their scheme without getting caught. The reality is that they have no choice but to take my hand as their survival in the party hinges on Atsuomi's removal.

Ryosuke could have not gotten involved in this fiasco but that would mean losing an opportunity to deliver a critical blow to the Citizens' Party, in particular to Senator Kijima. Thus, given his opportunistic nature, he figured there were more advantages to be gained by inserting himself in the game. By getting involved and keeping his enemies close, he can manipulate evidence to implicate both Naoe and Isomaru as the masterminds behind the attack, destroying the Citizens' Party's clean reputation. That way, Kijima and Miyako are also hindered by the scheme—a favourable outcome for the Peace Party.

Ryosuke was confident he could predict their thoughts and make them dance to his tune.

'I'm sure Naoe and Isomaru plan to use my 'support' to help with their scheme against Atsuomi, but ultimately, they aim to betray me in the end.'

A small smirk appeared on Ryosuke's face.

'They can try all they want. But in the end, they won't be able to escape my grasp.'

Ryosuke had a view of what he believed to be the big picture thanks to the intelligence provided by Hasegawa, his most loyal subordinate. He knew that Naoe and Isomaru had kidnapped a family member of who they believed to be from Atsuomi's upper circle. And he believed that they were blackmailing the executive in Atsuomi's circle to follow their orders. But despite this, Ryosuke deliberately sent Naoe and Isomaru a cryptic message, anticipating that they would grasp the intentions of said message. This way, Ryosuke can hide his cards whilst forcing Naoe and Isomaru to reveal their hand.

'Let's see how much information they will reveal to me. If it's not the whole picture I imagine, then—well it won't end up well for them. But if they give me all the information, then I'll know that they're willing to ally with me, an enemy, to eliminate Atsuomi. However, as soon as Atsuomi is eliminated the leverage I hold on them will disappear. That is why I have to slowly collect evidence to implicate them as the masterminds behind the assassination.'

Ryosuke only saw Naoe and Isomaru as pawns to use and dispose of once they had served their purpose. Although he could kill Naoe and Isomaru now since they would be arriving alone, it would be a short-sighted mistake.

This is because the public's perception of the Citizens' Party was far more favourable than that of the Peace Party's image. Therefore, if two big political factions within the ruling party were to disappear or be found murdered, the people's suspicion would immediately be cast on the Peace Party, who had various scandals in the past. But that was not the only issue.

'I have no doubt in my mind that if I were to kill Naoe and Isomaru now, Senator Kijima and Miyako, who are in 'bed together', would use the death of Naoe and Isomaru to their advantage. Victimising the Citizens' Party and subtly shifting the blame to the Peace Party, spreading propaganda through the media. Given that the Peace Party's public image has been tarnished in the past, the Japanese people would eat up the gossip and our prestige would decline even further whilst the Citizens' Party would elevate.'

This is why Ryosuke had no desire to kill Naoe and Isomaru, at least not yet. Doing so would create a large problem that would backfire on the Peace Party. But if he could use them to eliminate Atsuomi whilst framing them as the masterminds behind the scheme, then the Citizens' Party name would be dragged through the mud, providing an opportunity for the Peace Party to make a comeback in the next election.

Ryosuke was abruptly pulled away from his thoughts by Hasegawa's sharp voice.

"Sir, Naoe and Isomaru have arrived, alone, as instructed. We searched the car they arrived in and found nothing suspicious. A full body search revealed neither of them are wearing a wire and their cell phones have been powered off, with the battery being removed," Hasegawa reported diligently.

"Good. Now send them in, we have to continue to demonstrate proper 'courtesy' to our 'esteemed' guests," Ryosuke chucked mockingly, sarcasm dripping from his words.

The doors creaked open, revealing Naoe and Isomaru, clad in their standard suits, exuding a look of confidence to mask the unease that was creeping under their skin.

"Welcome, Naoe and Isomaru, it's been so long since we've had a chat, hasn't it?" Ryosuke rhetorically asked, condescension laced in his words.

"Ryosuke," Naoe said through gritted teeth, his voice full of resentment as his hands clenched tightly at his sides.

Isomaru stared silently at Ryosuke, hiding his seething rage behind his blank expression.

"Please take a seat so we can talk freely, would either of you like a drink?" asked Ryosuke, continuing his charade with a smile plastered on his face.

Naoe's lip twitched, his eyes quickly narrowing upon witnessing Ryosuke's shameless attitude. "Let's stop this nonsense, we know exactly what you want. So stop pretending."

Ryosuke's smile grew wider, his snake-like eyes opening to reflect his true feelings.

"Yes, you're right, no need to waste time but please take a seat so that we can share information. You have no issues with going first, right?"

The animosity behind the question could not be anymore transparent to Naoe's perceptive eyes.

'Ryosuke...he's testing me to see how much I tell him. Since I don't know exactly how much he knows, if I tell him too little we could be in danger. Alternatively, if I tell him too much then I give up any advantage I have. It seems even with age, his fangs are still sharp.'

But from the start, Naoe had no intention of hiding information from the beginning. He instinctively felt that Ryosuke knew all of his plans once he suspected that there was a traitor within his faction or Isomaru's faction. That was why Naoe knew that he should just appear to be honest in front of Ryosuke and share what he knew openly because Ryosuke held an overwhelming advantage in the discussion.

'If Isomaru and I want any chance of turning the tables against Ryosuke then we must be honest here.'

Naoe thought so for two reasons. One being that he actually needed Ryosuke's assistance to ensure that the plan works out perfectly. If they work together efficiently, then the chance of eliminating Atsuomi increases significantly with the more resources they will have available.

The second reason is that he might be able to gain Ryosuke's trust momentarily if he appears more transparent and subservient to the man. That is why Naoe had to act aggrieved at the start to portray the facade of a man holding onto his pride but shows reluctant cooperation by being honest. It would be more suspicious if the prideful Naoe willingly joined hands with Ryosuke with no resistance. That was how Naoe perceived things, which is why he and Isomaru acted like they did when they entered the building.

Isomaru opened his mouth for the first time to share intelligence. Carefully choosing his words.

"We have a double-agent, Takahashi Etsuo, that is deep within Atsuomi's circle. Which has led to significant information about his operations to be revealed that were not known."

Ryosuke's face no longer held a smile and instead adorned a blank expression, showing no particular reaction to Isomaru's words. Only a silent stare to prompt Isomaru to continue with his explanation.

"It turns out that Atsuomi is planning to visit various investors across the country with his son. We suspect that it has something to do with the "White Room", but it could be for other reasons like procuring funds for campaigning. Our double agent was unable to supply us with any specific details since he is also kept in the dark."

There was still no change in expression on Ryosuke's face, but on the inside his mind was racing.

'It looks like me deliberately being cryptic has led to me gaining new information. I suspected they had a double-agent, who is the family of the woman they kidnapped, so that lines up with my theory. But the "White Room" and the fact that Atsuomi has a son are new details that I didn't know. The fact that this information has been kept from the public for a long time means that Atsuomi possesses an organisation that has absolute control of information. I suspect this organisation is this "White Room" that Isomaru mentioned. Their double agent, Takahashi, has revealed some critical pieces of information that even I was unable to get my hands on.'

Ryosuke started rethinking his approach. This new information had

introduced new variables he had to consider.

'But the most distressing detail to me is that if Atsuomi is able to successfully create meaningful connections with those investors, then his influence will only grow, making it more difficult for Naoe and Isomaru to eliminate him. Also extra funds for campaigning will be a problem as well.'

This was a big concern for Ryosuke. Generally, it would be more favourable for the Citizens' Party to be as divided as possible and introducing a new faction headed by Atsuomi, to break the status quo, would achieve such a goal. However, the problem was that two major factions, that being Naoe's faction and Isomaru's faction, were slowly losing their position in the party primarily due to Senator Kijima's influence, that had been growing significantly in the past year. Since Miyako favours Kijima heavily, there is a chance that he might not run for the next election, meaning there is one less faction within the Citizens' Party competing for party representative. If Atsuomi achieves his goal and garners more investors, he will be able to carry out more vigorous campaigning in the future. As a result, Naoe and Isomaru will likely become redundant in the party, leading to there only being two prominent factions—Atsuomi's faction and Kijima's faction. This would be the worst-case scenario for Ryosuke because it would be more difficult to divide the party in the future—well, that is if he doesn't get involved and decides to watch. In other words, Ryosuke's perception of his involvement being an opportunity has changed to being a **necessity**.

'It seems this is a do or die situation now. If I don't get involved then the Citizens' Party will consolidate its power because Naoe's faction and Isomaru's faction will likely disappear in the future once Atsuomi acquires the funds. Therefore, the priority here is to eliminate Atsuomi by supporting Naoe and Isomaru. Then once I frame Naoe and Isomaru as the masterminds, the prestige of the Citizens' Party will drop. It won't matter whether Miyako or Kijima were involved or not because the fact is that they are all in the same political party. The people will condemn them for being ignorant and letting them hold positions of power in their political party.'

Although this would result in their only being Kijima and Miyako left in the party after killing Atsuomi and framing Naoe and Isomaru, the

fact that such a scandal took place in the Citizens' Party will be enough to completely destroy their public image moving forward. As a result, the Peace Party will have an opportunity to take the limelight because their scandals in the past were nothing on the scale that this plot would create. Therefore, the top priority for Ryosuke at this moment was to ensure that Naoe and Isomaru's scheme in eliminating Atsuomi is successful.

'I would have liked to use the "White Room" organisation to try and diminish Atsuomi's image. But given that this information was obtained through their double-agent, Takahashi, and how well this secret organisation has been kept from the public eye, if I were to release any information regarding its name to the public then that might tip Atsuomi off.'

Ultimately, the most ideal plan would be to kill Atsuomi because only through death can variables be extinguished. To be able to do this, a detailed itinerary has to be known and the only way to obtain such a thing would be to use the double-agent, Takahashi, that Naoe and Isomaru acquired. After all, information from the inside would yield the highest probability of success for an assassination.

But if the White Room's name or Atusomi's son were to be made public, it could tip Atsuomi off and compromise the double agent. Additionally, releasing details of just the name "White Room" and the fact that Atsuomi had a son could be easily covered up. Thus, Ryosuke, whose priority was to ensure Atsuomi's death was completed with one hundred percent success, had to keep the information he learned to himself.

"Let's put the "White Room" and Atsuomi's son on the backburner, for now. The priority is to stop Atsuomi from acquiring support from the investors that he plans to meet when he travels across the country. I assume your double agent has gathered some useful information regarding his itinerary for travel?"

Naoe and Isomaru exchanged subtle glances before nodding their heads to Ryosuke's words. They also knew that keeping such information a secret would be essential if they wanted the assassination to occur smoothly.

"Yes, our double agent had informed us that Atsuomi plans to travel in over a week's time. He said he cooperated with Atsuomi's security team to map out their route and deliberately chose a very specific route under the pretext of being 'convert'," Naoe said, presenting a map tucked into his pocket, showing a red line through the streets of Tokyo.

Naoe pointed at a specific point of the map.

"A convoy of large black SUVs with bulletproof windows and tires will travel through this long tunnel under a bridge. It will be the perfect place to set an ambush. We can easily trap them with blockades and send our overwhelming force of men to eliminate Atsuomi," narrated Naoe.

Naoe went on to explain the internal curved structure of the tunnel, and how the SUVs won't realise there is a blockade until it's too late, at which point both the entry and exit would have been blockaded. Ryosuke's assistance, by providing deployable wheel clamps that prevent rotation of wheels and battering rams to penetrate the bulletproof windows, will be instrumental in ensuring the mission's success.

"I agree with Naoe, even if Atsuomi's men are highly trained, our overwhelming force will enable us to kill him," Isomaru commented with arms crossed, his head nodding firmly in agreement as he leaned back in his chair.

Ryosuke thought carefully about the plan before ultimately agreeing. Clamps to immobilise vehicles with blockades as a countermeasure was a sound plan.

"Yes, it would be the best location, I concur with Naoe's opinion." Ryosuke said, showing a small smirk, as devious thoughts entered his mind.

'Atsuomi you won't be able to escape. You may not be as naive as I once thought you to be but you are arrogant if you think you can make a dent in the seniority system of Japan. The moment you opposed the status quo your fate was sealed.'

The meeting continued as they plotted specifics, making adaptable preparations in case there were any changes in plans from the information they received from Naoe's and Isomaru's double agent, Takahashi.

But one thing was certain. On the day of Atsuomi's travel, a lot of blood would be shed.

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Location: Unknown

The ceiling lights powered on, brightening the once pitch black room. Kiyotaka's eyes blinked open, quickly adjusting to the change in lighting.

'Today is the day I exit the facility...'

He still wore his usual blank expression, but deep inside there was an emotion slowly building within him that he wasn't familiar with. Yet, he had to suppress the feeling, continuing to wear the same face he had shown to the White Room staff for years.

With quick robotic motions he got dressed, wearing a fresh white gown before throwing the old one in the chute next to his bed.

WHIRRING

Kiyotaka's golden orbs snapped to the opening of the mechanical door, revealing instructor Souya, who had one hand placed in his pocket. The veins protruding from his forearm indicated that he was grasping something tightly within his pockets, a detail that did not go unnoticed by the young boy.

"Subject G4-004, follow me. You will be exiting the White Room today," said Souya, his tone clipped and tinged with authority, leaving the young boy with no choice but to comply.

With a curt nod, Kiyotaka walked side-by-side with Instructor Souya, only the clicking of their shoes on the sterile tiles to occupy the silence as they ambled down the white corridors, towards the sanitation facilities.

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After completing an early morning 'shower', Kiyotaka was given different clothes from his usual white gown.

'I recall seeing human beings wearing similar clothes during my virtual reality training. At the very least, those details presented to me through the various images I saw were true.'

Kiyotaka's thoughts naturally drifted to the scenes he saw during his virtual reality training. He remembered how everyday people were dressed and how vastly different it was from the clothing in the White Room. He didn't wholeheartedly trust the information he was provided through the virtual reality headset. After all, doubts creeped in his head when he saw how 'mechanical' normal humans walked and acted, something that was an irregularity when compared to the stories he read in the White Room's library during his minimal free time. Reading the few available fiction books, conveying **curated** details. In those books, the images that he imagined in his head were very different from what was presented in the virtual reality images. He figured that the 'mechanical' movements of the human beings was likely a limitation of the virtual reality device.

Walking towards a familiar division in the endless, sterile corridors, instead of turning left, they turned right towards the secure door that required a key card to access.

'Will I get to see what's beyond this door?'

Kiyotaka's curiosity could not help but awaken within his body, as he subtly glanced at Instructor Souya, waiting for him to open the door.

But instead of opening the door, instructor Souya revealed what he had been hiding in his pockets. A syringe with a transparent fluid staring menacingly at the young boy.

Kiyotaka felt a pang of disappointment. Although he anticipated such

an action, there was a small part of him that wanted to see what layed beyond the reinforced door. To learn more about the internal structure of the facility. But given how well controlled information is within the White Room, it wouldn't make sense for them to allow Kiyotaka to see any further than he needs to. They were aware of how monstrous his memory was and the last thing they want is him mapping out the exact route to the White Room facility, once exposed to the outside world.

"Hold out your hand, Subject G4-004. Do not resist, let me administer the fluid into your bloodstream," commanded Souya, his voice composed of a mixture of dominance but also nervousness, as if he was afraid of the repercussions if the boy relented.

Kiyotaka's expression did not change, keeping his signature blank look, he held out his arm obediently to the instructor.

Souya breathed a sigh of relief, pleased that the young boy did not resist.

'Huh, I guess he really is obedient.'

The fluid quickly seeped into the boy's blood, and after a few minutes the boy could feel his muscles slowly failing as his body turned limp, falling to the ground. Luckily, Souya still caught the boy lest he suffer a concussion from the impact of his head hitting the hard tile floor. After all, he would be meeting investors in the future so he was a commodity, for now.

As his eyes slowly closed, the last image he saw was the audible beeping sound of the door, as he watched Souya scan a keycard on the keypad.

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Waking from his stupor from the soft hum of the car engine, Kiyotaka found himself in the back passenger seats of a luxury black sedan, his seat belt unfastened. He quickly glanced at his surroundings, finding

himself alone in the back of the car with only a driver up front, dark shades shielding his eyes. There was no device strapped to his body to measure his vitals. Just his normal clothes that he wore after his 'shower'.

The rays of an unfamiliar light shone through the glass to his left, commanding the attention of his golden irises. As he glanced out of the window his breathing abruptly ceased.

'This is...'

His thoughts couldn't help but momentarily stop. Although his outward expression did not change it felt like his heart felt a pulse for the first time in a long time. The sight of the setting sun behind the tall buildings, painting the landscape in a vibrant orange. Children in the distance adorning expressions of joy and laughter. Parents looking over them with gentle smiles.

Kiyotaka couldn't understand why his body had reacted this way. Why did the scenery in front of his very eyes make his heart skip a beat? The White Room had shown him the very same images but they had not moved his heart. Mainly because dwelling on such thoughts was a distraction, although that was only a part of it. Was it because he didn't trust the images fed to him by White Room staff? Perhaps, but the sights he saw showed similar elements that the virtual reality device did. So why? Why was this so different?

Kiyotaka tried to answer the myriad of questions rushing through his head logically, but couldn't determine the answers. Perhaps the answer lied in more abstract reasoning.

'It feels more real, more authentic...I can't explain it in words but somewhere deep down that answer resonated with me the most.'

It felt like a part of him that had been missing for years had been rekindled. For a brief second, he felt alive—like there was something more out in this wider world, than just struggling for survival.

For the rest of the journey he couldn't take his eyes off the sights he saw. Just absentmindedly staring out of the tinted windows, maintaining his usual blank expression.

When he entered the world what greeted him was the same sterile, white walls that he had seen his whole life. A reflection of who he was—a blank canvas. There were no colours. Just the same monotony in his life. The everyday hardships he had to face just to

survive. Countless people had tried to suppress him, whether it was the fourth generation subjects or even the instructors. Those who bared their fangs at him he vowed to drive them to destruction. That was how he had lived his life since he was born, standing at the top of the White Room.

'All my life my only purpose had been to survive, no matter what it cost me. That was the focal point of my whole life. It didn't matter what I had to do, as long as I was the last person standing, then I was the victor. I was safe. If I didn't keep moving forward then I would disappear like the others. Becoming a mere number on a spreadsheet. Although I was curious as a child to the world that lay beyond the White Walls, I buried that dangerous sentiment away. It wasn't important to dwell on if I wanted to continue my studies. Which is why I was convinced that absorbing the White Room's teachings would be my only purpose in life, struggling endlessly for survival, but...'

Kiyotaka couldn't help but feel like his world was tipped upside down. He pondered more about his purpose in life. Could there be more reasons than just survival for his sake of living? Did the outside world have these answers?

He still believed that there was more he could learn in the White Room, but the sights in front of him made him question his initial conclusion, as the childlike curiosity, he had suppressed all of his time in the White Room, couldn't help but surface. He wondered what more knowledge he could absorb in the wider world. To help him grow and maybe even evolve.

But as his eyes drifted to the birds high in the sky, his reality came crashing down on him.

'Those birds...they can just freely fly across the vastness of this world with no chains to bind them down. Able to make any choice to decide their own fate.'

It was an abstract concept that the White Room had made sure to stomp out. The idea of freedom, being able to do what you want with nothing but your own abilities as your crutch. Which is why Kiyotaka had to recompose himself in the face of the bait dangling in front of his eyes. He couldn't afford for his already shattered heart to be

reduced to dust, by wishing for things beyond his reach, for now.

After all, even if Kiyotaka wanted to escape during this trip, it was too risky, for a variety of reasons. One of the main reasons is that he knew little about how far his father's reach extended and whether escaping would just be a fool's errand. As soon as he escapes, that variable of 'trust' that he had been cultivating would be lost. Understanding the scope of his father's influence and limitations would be the first step if the objective were to escape—requiring knowledge that is hard to come by in the White Room.

'This will only be for a couple weeks. It would be best if I don't get too attached to this new world. It will hinder my ability to learn once I return to the White Room.'

That was what he told himself. He always told himself this when his thoughts went astray. He had to remind himself of all the children he had seen collapse before his very eyes. They represented those who didn't realise their place and got complacent. Those who flew too close to the sun, hitting their limit and inevitably falling into the abyss.

He wouldn't repeat their mistakes. Striving for improvement was a necessity. As the one who stood at the top, he had the ability to reach heights they never could.

Which is why now wasn't the time to get greedy. This little field trip was a peak into another world, a recon mission to provide new opportunities, and acquire new knowledge to stimulate his advancement.

He knew that there would come a time when his growth would stagnate within the White Room. Where he would no longer be able to grow which would defy his nature. Kiyotaka had to seek growth because that was the adaptive defence mechanism that he had nurtured to protect himself from falling from the mountain that was the fourth-generation. The fundamental law that had been indoctrinated into his skull was that if you cease to grow you cease to exist, at least in the White Room's environment.

Therefore, once he had absorbed all the teachings of the White Room

and when presented with an opportunity, he would shed his skin. Breaking the facade of being a loyal hound that follows the White Room's orders.

With all the teachings of the White Room in his arsenal, he would forge his own set of wings to navigate the wide world, seeking new knowledge to extrapolate his growth. Looking for the answers to the questions for which the teachings of the White Room could not conceptualise.

But only time would tell whether this new fledgling's wings would grow to remain strong or melt like wax.

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Location: Tokyo

It was late night. Senior Inspector, Hiroshi Kameda, had just completed his overtime shift at the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department Headquarters and begun his drive home.

The streets of the Tokyo metropolitan area were lit up with neon colours marking the wake of the redlight district, as night dwellers began their prowl, filling the cold air with chatter. Windows along the skyscrapers remained illuminated even at this late hour, a testament to the Japanese work culture, logging as much as 80 hours per week, often with unpaid overtime labelled as "self-improvement time". Even though such actions are illegal, the authorities often do not take serious action to enforce the law and protect the exploited workers.

Streamlines of cars flowed along the slick asphalt, the hum of their engines mixing with the distant chatter of pedestrians.

Turning onto the expressway, the rays of moonlight combined with the distant city lights made the waters of Tokyo Bay shimmer, filling Hiroshi with a fleeting sense of calm before giving way to intrusive thoughts, as his mind inevitably drifted towards his 'work' that had no direction.

'It's still the same bullshit. I am no closer to collecting enough evidence to

even implicate the likes of Naoe and Isomaru as the masterminds behind the organised crime operations.'

Being one of the few individuals in his department, that bothered to work on the case, made Hiroshi's work incredibly more difficult. It was no surprise progress was slow.

Thinking more about his work opened the floodgates to the guilt that burdened his heart of not seeing his family often. But he decided to try and be optimistic, and think of happier things.

'Honami's birthday is coming up. She'll be turning 10 this year...'

A small smile couldn't help but emerge on his face when he thought of Honami, his older daughter. She was much like his wife Chisato, always wearing that radiant smile that lit up every room she walked through, her kind demeanor exuded understanding and care.

Whenever he visited on Christmas, he heard the stories where she would protect her younger sister, Yukari, from bullies or stand up for the justice of others, reminding Hiroshi of himself and his journey in pursuing justice. Seeing that Honami carried the same sense of justice and values that Hiroshi did, he couldn't help but feel incredibly proud of her.

When kids at such a young age often fall victim to the pressure of the thoughts of what others would think about them, Honami didn't. She, just like her father, didn't compromise her ideals and sense of justice.

Hiroshi knew she was intelligent and seemed mature for her age when compared to other children, always getting top marks at school, having many friends due to her popularity, and glow with kindness that couldn't help but attract the masses.

But the more he thought about it the more his intrusive thoughts leaked into his mind, casting shadows of doubt and hints of self-hatred.

'Do you really think that just because she shows you a smile every time you leave means everything is okay? That your 'noble' cause is justified? That one visit every year is enough to make amends to the family you

abandoned? Or are you just telling yourself that to avoid the truth?'

His heart sank as he thought about the said questions that lingered in his mind.

A lump formed in his throat at the thought of confronting the answer to those questions so he quickly distracted himself by turning on the radio, changing the frequency to find the late night news that he regularly listens to.

However, as he was changing news stations, a late-night show talk that uttered a familiar name quickly caught his attention.

"Tonight, we're joined by a very special guest to conduct an exclusive interview. The popular yet elusive 'golden boy' of the Citizens' Party, Senator Kijima."

Kijima acknowledged the host's words with a polite greeting before a round of applause followed.

'Kijima? I heard he's the dark-horse in politics at the moment. The senior members within the Citizens' Party claim he's nothing but a trivial variable, who will be crushed beneath the seniority system, at least that's what they're trying to subtly convey to the public.'

But Hiroshi thought differently. From the rumours he had been hearing, it seemed like Kijima's presence in the Citizens' Party had been rapidly growing, especially in the last year.

'I heard Kijima and Prime Minister Miyako seem to have a very close relationship.'

"Let's begin the interview with your reputation. The people like to consider you as an anomaly in Japanese politics, having no scandals or blemishes on your record. We're all curious and would like to know how you maintain such a spotless reputation amidst the turbulent environment that is politics?"

A short pause followed before, Kijima's measured voice emerged from the speakers.

"The answer lies in staying true to one's values and principles. I strive

to always serve the people and deliver on my promises, prioritising their needs over ambition."

"Sure, not compromising your integrity is an admirable deed, but aren't you inviting criticism of being seen as too idealistic? Some may argue that effective governance demands sacrifice by getting one's hands dirty."

A small chuckle followed, before Kijima's earnest voice ran through.

"I'm quite familiar with that argument. But I believe one can still demonstrate excellence without compromising their values, taking on challenges with integrity and fairness. What the Japanese people need is leaders they can trust especially during times of uncertainty."

Hiroshi couldn't help but feel his heart moved by the man's words. He had heard them before but there was something about the way Kijima said them, exuding endless charisma.

'I guess it's no surprise that he's gaining recognition. Well that, and his hand in ANHS that the government supports with a great deal of funding.'

Hiroshi briefly wondered what the prestigious school was like. He had heard of the mysterious S-System, whose details are shrouded in mystery, kept hidden from the public, promising a future of 100% guaranteed employment upon completing studies as well as other benefits.

'I wonder if my daughters, Honami and Yukari, would be interested in attending that school...'

Similar questions proceeded in the background, the chatter from the radio mixing with the faint hum of traffic and blaring horns, offering Hiroshi a distraction from the intrusive thoughts that once roamed his mind—until a couple interesting questions caught his attention.

"While we're on the topic of challenges, there have been talks of division within the ruling Citizens' Party. What is your perception of these dynamics?" said the host with a sharp tone.

A long pause follows, symbolising Kijima's deep contemplation.

"All political parties will, at one point in their lifetime, experience a clash of opinions that comes naturally with a democratic system. Mishandling differences can lead to dire consequences. Which is why my goal is to cultivate cooperation between the party members to ensure our party's ideology stays true—improving the lives of the citizens we serve," said Kijima with a voice full of conviction.

"Your words are certainly reassuring, senator. But just one more question before we take a break. Some new faces in politics have been garnering a lot of attention, particularly relatively young people like Ayanokōji Atsuomi. Do you see this as a challenge to your vision for the Citizens' Party?"

The mention of Atsuomi's name commanded Hiroshi's attention.

'Atsuomi again, huh? His name is being mentioned here as well? It seems that his name hasn't been suppressed by the weight of the seniority system. That feeling I had in my gut rang true. He is different from the others who fell before he made his debut.'

Kijima's response came through after a long pause, snapping Hiroshi's attention back to the speaker as he carefully listened to Kijima's response. He too was curious what Kijima thought about people like Atsuomi.

"I believe that the appearance of new blood can rejuvenate the party and bring forth healthy competition, pushing us to produce better results whilst still staying true to our party's vision."

Hiroshi didn't know why but a tingly feeling permeated through his skin. Like there was something ominous about the man's words that he couldn't quite understand.

The sight of his old apartment complex shook him out of his thoughts, as he parked in his unit's designated parking spot. With the flick of his wrist he withdrew the key from the ignition, picked up his work bag, and shut his car's door. The thud from the car door disturbing the otherwise peaceful ambience.

With fatigued steps, he began his ascent up the arduous set of stairs towards his new home, that he had lived in since taking the case. It

was a relatively cheap apartment complex due to most of his money being funnelled, as discreetly as possible, to his family. He told himself this was his punishment for being absent in his children's lives. To live a life devoid of luxuries, hoping it would ease the burden of guilt on his heart.

Fishing the keys out of his coat, with the twist of the knob, he opened the door to reveal his home shrouded in a cold darkness, a testament to the building's lacking insulation and natural lighting. A direct contrast to the warm atmosphere, in the past, that welcomed him home everyday, causing a specific memory to play in his head.

"Welcome home, dear, how was your day?" his wife, Chisato, asked him, her long pink hair tied into a messy bun, a gentle smile lighting up her face and the scent of her cooking, that he loves, gracing his nose.

"Ah, just the usual, Chi. Just some petty crimes here and there and lots of paperwork," Hiroshi sighed, placing his shoes on the rack before giving his wife a peck on the lips.

Chisato let out a playful giggle as their lips briefly connected. "Well, I'm glad you're home safe, honey. But could you please do me a favour and call the kids? Dinner is ready, and I made your favourite," Chisato responded, glancing at Hiroshi warmly, her eyes shining with a look of adoration.

"Of course, darling," Hiroshi said through light chuckles, as he walked through the house towards Honami's room after finding Yukari's room empty. The two sisters were inseparable and had a very tight bond, often playing together.

"Honami? Yukari? Are you in there?" Hiroshi called out, gently knocking on the door, but no response came back. He knocked again before slowly opening the door upon hearing no sound.

"Honami? Yukari?" Hiroshi called again, slowly walking into the room before he felt something hug his legs, the sound of light giggles snapping his eyes downwards, behind his legs.

"We got you now, criminal! There is no escape with Inspector

Honami on the case!" Honami, his oldest daughter, said in a playful way, trying to wear a fierce expression that failed miserably. Hiroshi felt like he was staring at a cute koala, holding tightly on a branch of a tree.

Hiroshi glanced at his other leg where the younger, Yukari, stared at him with her big doe eyes whilst wearing a cute pout. She was repeatedly nodding her head in agreement with Honami's words.

'She's using big words now, huh?'

Hiroshi let out a deep chuckle, as the stress he accumulated, from the paperwork earlier in the day, quickly vanished and a large grin surfaced on his youthful face.

"Using big words now, huh, Honami? You really are a little star," Hiroshi said, gently patting her head causing her 'fierce' expression to melt into a blissful smile.

Glancing at Yukari, he began rubbing the top of her dome with his other hand, Yukari quickly mirroring her older sister. "And you, Yukari, such strength at a young age? Your mother must be feeding you something good."

"What's the hold up? Dinner is getting cold!" Chisato said, her loud voice echoing to the three's ears.

"Uh oh, it looks like mother bear is upset. How about you two give her a hug to cease her anger," Hiroshi said, with a hint of feigned nervousness in his voice.

Honami playfully saluted Hiroshi, with her younger sister, Yukari, copying her actions, before both of them slowly ran off towards the dinner table, Honami holding Yukari's hand as their pink hair bounced with excitement.

The memory ended there as Hiroshi felt his heart sink again looking at the emptiness of his apartment.

'It's too painful. These memories cut deeper than any wound I have ever felt. But I'm in too deep now. I can't return to them with nothing to show or—or my heart might shatter, knowing it was all for nothing. Confronting

the crushing fact that all those years of my absence were wasted.'

Hiroshi regained his composure, setting aside his belongings from work near his bedroom's tallboy. Moving towards the kitchen he began preparing 'dinner', reminding him of the tasty dishes that his wife, Chisato, prepared for him everyday he returned from work.

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Seated at his dining table, he began chomping down on the instant ramen, fried egg and frozen vegetables that had thawed. The TV buzzed as he glanced at the various programmes it had to offer, briskly switching through the channels to find the news.

KNOCK* *KNOCK* *KNOCK

Three powerful knocks resonated through his apartment, indicating that someone was at the front door.

Hiroshi glanced at the clock—it read 10pm.

"Who the fuck could be knocking at this hour?" he muttered under his breath, irritation palpable in his tone.

But his blood suddenly ran cold, as a sinister thought appeared in his mind.

'No...could it be? They've made a move on me?'

Ba-dump *Ba-dump* *Ba-dump*

His heart pounded through his chest. He assumed the worst, thinking Naoe's subordinates or Isomaru's men had come to eliminate him.

With careful steps, he approached the kitchen, pulling out a sharp kitchen knife that shined with malice under the dim ceiling lights.

Due to Japan's strict laws on gun control, officers are not allowed to

keep guns at their home. They must lock their guns in secure armories at the police department they are stationed at.

Hiding the weapon behind his back he approached the door, getting ready to open it—but stopped in his tracks.

On the ground an unmarked envelope lay, staring at him ominously. It looked like it had been put through his mail slot on his door. He must have forgotten to lock the mail slot.

Stepping around the envelope, he checked the eyepiece on the door and saw nothing. Just the night sky with only stars to witness the identity of the person behind the envelope's appearance.

Looking back over his shoulder, his eyes naturally gravitated to the strange envelope. Gently picking it up, he walked towards his dining table, placing it down before taking a seat.

Upon opening the envelope, Hiroshi found a small flash drive and a note with writing scribbled on it.

"Use it wisely," Hiroshi whispered, reading the contents of the piece of paper.

'What the heck? What sort of prank is this?'

But Hiroshi's curiosity peaked. What could the message possibly mean?

Walking towards his room, he picked up his personal laptop before plugging in the USB.

Opening the external drive folder, he found that there was only one sub-directory embedded in the folder.

Upon opening the folder and viewing its vast assortment of contents, Hiroshi's eyes widened and his breathing halted as his hands began trembling.

'No way...how—how could this be? Who could have acquired such detailed evidence?'

The contents revealed verified timestamps of video recordings, audio recordings, and photographs that presented clear evidence of a conspiracy between Ryosuke, Naoe and Isomaru.

'Plotting Atsuomi's death as well as his son's? On the day he is planning to visit the hospital to provide support for the youth and underprivileged children?'

The initial period of shock upon witnessing the contents of the evidence quickly vanished, opening the floodgates to a bubbling rage within Hiroshi. His explosive emotions clouded his thinking momentarily, distracting him from the reveal of Atsuomi having a son.

'These bastards. They really plan to assassinate Atsuomi and his son on such a day?'

His fists, resting on the table, shook with rage. He couldn't believe such a dastardly plot was occurring behind the scenes. For Hiroshi, whose goal was to create a world where children could laugh and live freely, safe from the dangers lurking in the darker corners, their scheme was unforgivable.

But as he gradually regained his composure, he realised an important fact.

*'This evidence...it's a good start for sure and maybe on its own it might be enough to implicate them. But I want the outcome to be a 100% certainty with no chance of failure, ensuring the masterminds and the foot soldiers are put behind bars. I **need** it to work. The only way for this to implicate them with 100% certainty is if I—'*

As these thoughts swirled in his mind he arrived at a crossroads. Will he take this chance to finally eliminate the cancer that was Naoe and Isomaru? Or will he fall in line?

*'No I can't. This is my only chance to make up for the lost years. Even if I'm going to make an unreasonable request of **him**, despite never meeting the man, I have to do it. To ensure that those bastards are served a cold dish of justice.'*

In the process of constructing his new resolution, he realised one important fact. **His family's safety**. That was his utmost priority. He needed to make sure that if he is exposed, those bastards can't reach them. Even if Hiroshi had changed his name, there was no guarantee they would be safe.

*'It looks like I will have to make another request of **that man**. I have to convince him. Assure him that my plan will succeed.'*

With a solid plan of attack forming in Hiroshi's mind, his eyes drifted to his phone as he read past texts between himself and his wife, Chisato, scrolling to an image of his daughters.

"Papa's coming home. I promised that I would. And I won't break it. Just wait a bit longer," Hiroshi whispered under his breath, his eyes blazing with a fire of determination.

It was all or nothing. Only time would tell which outcome Hiroshi would incur.

□□□□□□□ ✧ [M][A][C][H][I][N][A][T][I][O][N][S] ✧ □□□□□□□

Location: Outside Tokyo

It was morning.

Kiyotaka was wide awake, leaning on the balcony of the villa that his father had sent him to stay in temporarily. It was a secluded location that was away from even the suburbs, but close enough so that it wasn't too isolated.

Whilst breathing the crisp, fresh air that he had grown accustomed to, he found himself hypnotized by the beauty of the rising sun. It's rays lighting up the dark regions of the endless forest of trees. The nearby lake with its clear, blue, fresh water, shimmering with warmth as aquatic life woke from their slumber.

He found himself repeatedly pondering why such a scene moved his heart, after all, the images seen through virtual reality had the same characteristics.

His father had instructed him to read an assortment of books that he

had never read before because they would have served no purpose whilst he was in the White Room.

Glancing over his shoulder he saw the stack of books he had just been examining moments ago before taking a break to glance at the scenery.

"The Art of Conversation," Kiyotaka muttered under his breath, a crack of frustration on his otherwise blank expression.

That was the title of one of the books he had just started reading after finishing the others. However, this particular book seemed to trouble him greatly, as he struggled to apply the concepts whilst conducting an exorbitant amount of simulations in his mind. That was because he lacked experience in engaging in meaningful conversations with people, thus there was no data for him to extrapolate the 'normal' flow of a human conversation.

His first four years of his life were spent in isolation training, so it wasn't like he could use any memories collected from there. The years that followed weren't helpful either. His interactions with the other White Room students of the fourth-generation weren't exactly pleasant. Most of the time they were actively pointing their swords at his throat, trying to sabotage, harm, or even aim for his life.

Whilst staring into the vastness of the sky, a memory from the past proceeded to play in his mind.

In the memory, Kiyotaka lay on his bunk bed, his eyes shut, surrounded by other students also lying under their sheets. At the time of the memory, it was a year after all the remaining students had completed their isolation training and had begun group activities, which was why everyone was bunked together in the same room.

The room wasn't pitch black, but it was still very dark. Only a faint light source in the distance provided any semblance of lighting.

click* *click* *click

Kiyotaka's eyes opened immediately, the softest sounds of footsteps

enough to alert his survival instincts.

His senses had been honed after experiencing the dozens of eyes, blurred with bloodlust, that always followed him. He had anticipated that students would try and aim for his life while he was sleeping, knowing that it would be the best time to cut him down. When he was the most vulnerable to their wrath.

Instinctively, he shifted his head away from the pillow as a student's hand, carrying a sharp weapon, violently thrust it towards where his throat once lay. But he was too slow, as the blade got caught in the mattress's springs and Kiyotaka evaded the lethal attack.

The sharpness of the blade was strange. Any cutlery given during their scheduled meal time was carefully monitored and it was ensured that there were no sharp objects, only blunt ones. The staff took careful measures to ensure all cutlery was accounted for. Which only left one other possibility.

Kiyotaka quickly deduced that someone in the White Room staff had intentionally given the vulnerable boy a weapon, whispering sweet lies to manipulate his weak mind. It was strange to Kiyotaka. Although the staff did not explicitly say student's couldn't attack each other, they still wanted to have subjects to garner data. That was Kiyotaka's perspective.

Kiyotaka couldn't know that the White Room had already achieved its objective by gathering at least five years of data from the fourth-generation. Whatever followed was just icing on the cake from their perspective because in the first place, they did not expect anyone to survive and complete the whole curriculum.

'It must have been one of the White Room instructors. One of them gave this child a sharp knife in secret. I can't say for certain who the culprit is because a lot of the instructors seem to be hostile to me.'

Some of the instructors had grown particularly resentful of the top performing student of the fourth-generation. Their attempts at making him break down had not been yielding results, so they resorted to extreme measures.

In the first place, these instructors weren't of sane mind, after all, what kind of human would willingly harm children to this extent?

Kiyotaka swiftly slid off the bed. Panic quickly began surging within the attacker's body, as he desperately tried to pry the knife out from the mattress, hoping to regain the advantage. But the knife was stuck. Firmly lodged between the metal springs.

That single moment of tunnel vision gave Kiyotaka the opportunity to step into the boy's blindspot at breakneck speed, delivering a powerful, precise blow to the back of the boy's knees.

An audible thud followed as the boy's legs swiftly buckled under the force of the kick, his body crumply to the hard, tiled floor. Turning his head towards the direction of the kick, the attacker found colour quickly draining from his face. He shivered in fright upon seeing Kiyotaka's cold, golden gaze staring at him. Eyes akin to a predator staring at their prey.

"W-Wait, I-I didn't mean to do it! D-Dont—," he lied, stuttering and stumbling over his words as his body trembled with fear at Kiyotaka's approach, his words swiftly getting cut off by the blunt force on his throat.

Kiyotaka showed no restraint, following his attack by quickly stepping on the boy's hands, concentrating his weight on the fragile bones in the fingers before moving onto joints.

Loud screams of pain and sickening sounds of cracks followed, reverberating between the pristine white walls of the vast room, forcing all the other fourth generation students out of their slumber. The commotion caused by his soaring wails quickly alerted the White Room staff, who swiftly powered on the industrial ceiling lights to find a horrific sight.

With an iron grasp on the boy's hair, Kiyotaka dragged his attacker across the white floor, painting it red with a trail of blood. The attacker's face was unrecognisable after the battering he took. His body limp from the precise, calculated attacks that Kiyotaka had inflicted upon him.

Kiyotaka callously dropped the still conscious boy in the open space, so that all who bore witness to the scene could see his next actions.

"P-Please, show m-mercy!" The young boy on the ground begged as tears mixed with blood flowed down his cheeks.

Voices from the fourth-generation subjects watching the scene joined in, demanding that Kiyotaka cease his destructive violence.

"Stop this madness, you—you monster!"

"He's had enough!"

"Don't you think you're taking this too far?"

Kiyotaka's golden orbs snapped to his attacker. His eyes flickered with confusion momentarily before retaining their usual cold. Why should he show the boy any mercy? In the White Room, once someone bared their fangs at Kiyotaka, he wouldn't hesitate to drive them to destruction.

"You attacked me first. Don't lament as if you're the victim," Kiyotaka responded with an artic voice before glancing at the other subjects with a murderous gaze, **"I'll decide when he's had enough."**

The fourth-generation's faces paled, their eyes shaking with fright upon hearing his merciless response and the look that Kiyotaka gave them.

Kiyotaka deliberately kept the boy alive as long as possible to drive fear into the hearts of the other subjects. Warning them to stop their foolish actions because the result would always be the same.

The memory ended there.

Kiyotaka let out a deep sigh.

'Not really the most useful interactions to extrapolate simulated conversations. Most of the time I was alone with only my thoughts to occupy me—no, that's not true, ***she*** *was also there...'*

But Kiyotaka refused to open those memories up once again, suppressing them to the back of his mind.

In the end the young boy realised that he would have to conversate with a normal person to be able to apply the concepts that the book articulated. Only then could he fully grasp the teachings and master them. That was always how he functioned. Once he understood the fundamentals then the growth that would follow is exponential.

Kiyotaka's thoughts soon drifted to a strange thing he had noticed that occurred on the previous night. Usually, the expressionless men in suits would give him packaged meals consisting of foods he had eaten in the White Room. But this time, the large refrigerator downstairs had been restocked with countless fresh vegetables, fruits, meat, rice, spices, snacks, frozen treats and much more produce, a lot of which Kiyotaka did not recognise.

'Hmm?'

The distant sound of crunching gravel disturbed the peaceful ambient noise, prying him away from his thoughts. His golden orbs sharpened on a black car, with tinted windows, approaching the villa via the gravel road.

It soon stopped at the entrance of the villa, where a man with a blank expression got out of the driver seat of the car. Opening the passenger doors before proceeding to the boot, emptying a various assortment of luggage that looked feminine.

Kiyotaka's gaze snapped to the movement from one of the open passenger doors. A young girl, who looked the same age as Kiyotaka, stepped out of the car, stretching her limbs before glancing around. Her long, light pink hair gracefully danced in the open air before her head turned towards the villa.

At that instant, their eyes met. The young girl's deep, blue eyes with Kiyotaka's calm, golden gaze.

Her blue orbs widened before a beautiful smile graced her face, innocently waving at the young boy.

Kiyotaka's breathing stopped momentarily. Her smiling face overlapped with a familiar smile he saw in the past.

This marked the beginning of when the two young soul's met. Not knowing that their fate lay intertwined from this point onwards. Only time would tell whether their fate would be blissful—or tragic.

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A/N: Happy new year! I hope you all enjoy the chapter.

V0 - Chapter 6: The Calm Before the Storm

Location: Tokyo

It was later in the afternoon. The sun had slowly begun its descent, painting the sky in hues of gold and amber. Birds were perched atop the nearby trees, their chirps mixing with the humming of bustling cars traversing the streets to nearby schools.

Two young girls, adorning the same school uniform, were walking side-by-side along the concrete footpath, their light pink hair swaying gently from the afternoon breeze.

The sidewalks had faint hints of cracks, a testament to the aging infrastructure of the suburban streets of Tokyo for which the young sisters found themselves navigating.

Upon reaching the familiar white stripes on the road that were illuminated by slanting rays of the late afternoon sun, the older girl looked over her shoulder, glancing at her younger sister, before shifting her school bag to her other shoulder.

The younger girl's gaze was locked on her feet as she slowly trudged her way towards her older sister.

"Yukari," the older sister, Honami, called out tenderly, her blue eyes immediately softening as she held out her palm.

Yukari's orbs widened slightly to Honami's outstretched hand, her lips turning upwards slightly as their fingers intertwined.

The two stood waiting at the edge of the curb with Honami adjusting her head left and right to gauge the oncoming traffic. It was a busy time given that school had just ended recently. Cars whizzed by the

duo, not realising that they were legally obligated to give way to pedestrians on the zebra crossing. Witnessing that the painted lines meant little to the drivers, Honami couldn't help but feel her chest tighten.

"Wait," Honami said with a firm voice, squeezing her sister's hand in reassurance before slightly bending her knees to level with Yukari's eyes, "We'll go when it's safe, okay?" Yukari nodded slowly; her eyes wide but with an unmistakable trust embedded within them.

Eventually, the passing cars came to a stop on each side, waiting for the two to cross the road.

Honami took the first step, walking at a pace that Yukari could follow comfortably. The warmth of the crossing, that had retained the day's heat, spread throughout the grips of their shoes, with only the faint scent of exhaust fumes of the stationary cars entering the two young girls' noses.

Yukari's brows were furrowed as she stuck close to Honami, her small and hesitant steps reflected the nervousness that was brewing within her as her eyes darted left and right, sneaking peeks at the cars menacingly staring back at her.

Honami noticed her younger sister's unease and gently squeezed her hand, quickly attracting Yukari's gaze. "Just keep walking with me," Honami said, her voice radiating warmth as a gentle smile adorned her face.

Reaching halfway across, a silver sedan began to roll forward slightly, its engine began howling impatiently at the duo's slow pace.

Yukari flinched, stopping in her tracks before closing her eyes instinctively in fright at the car's aggressive stance. Honami quickly noticed her younger sister's distress and immediately shielded Yukari before her blue eyes turned sharper as they snapped to the driver. Sensing the vast depth of animosity behind Honami's ocean blue gaze, the driver braked and pulled his car back slightly.

"It's okay, Yukari, we're safe," Honami whispered whilst squeezing her hand again, the gentleness in her tone reassuring Yukari as her eyes

slowly opened.

Honami took the lead again, increasing the pace slightly. Their quickened steps eventually led them to the other side of the road. Honami looked down at her younger sister with a warm smile, carefully tucking loose light pink strands of hair behind Yukari's ear.

"You did well," complimented Honami, attempting to build up her younger sister's confidence, before taking a tone comparable to a caretaker's.

"But always remember this—never rush, even if it's scary."

Yukari nodded silently, but the twinkle of admiration that flickered through her eyes could not be missed. She saw Honami as both her dear older sister and best friend who she always felt safe with. As long as Honami was next to her, she felt a sense of comfort—that everything was going to be okay.

Yukari wasn't always like this. She was naturally a very curious child whose eyes sparkled whenever she saw something new. But her father's absence had had adverse effects on Yukari's behaviour.

The two sisters continued their journey home—a place that had lost its usual glow due to one person's absence for the past few years.

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Upon arriving at the familiar street, Honami and Yukari made their way past the mailbox, trudging towards the door to their home via the checkered, grey concrete path.

Honami turned her school bag to the front of her body, proceeding to fish the keys out from one of the more obscure pockets. The sisters' mother, Chisato, gave Honami the responsibility of holding the keys to their home and walking her younger sister home—a job that their father Ichinose Kameda, or rather now Hiroshi Kameda, was in charge of in the past.

Entering the house with slow steps, the sisters felt the warm atmosphere that they were familiar with. The scent of brewed tea lingering in the air permeated through the sisters' noses.

Whilst kicking off their shoes and placing them in the nearby rack, Honami's eyes drifted towards the family photos on the wall, one particular photo induced a nostalgic feeling within her, as she began replaying the memory in her mind.

It was a hot summer day. The sun had been baking the citizens of Tokyo with its high intensity rays of light, forcing the inhabitants to visit the local beach. Honami's family was no different.

The four of them—Kameda, Chisato, Honami, and Yukari, found themselves on the beach but the scene that was painted was unmistakably amusing.

Golden sand stretched endlessly, shimmering under the blazing heat of the sun, but towards the wetted section, two young girls, Honami and Yukari, were behaving mischievously.

Yukari knelt beside Honami, attempting to hold back the burst of giggles that threatened to escape her lips, picking up chunks of wet sand with her small hands and patting the mound of sand that threatened to completely cover her father, Kameda.

Only Kameda's head was visible, poking out comically from the sandy cocoon that he found himself in, his two cheeky daughters had been burying him with wet sand that had dried. Honami had been guiding her younger sister, Yukari, to use the wet sand rather than the softer dry sand for a sturdier structure upon solidification, ensuring their father was trapped. Kameda could have easily escaped but obviously played along with their antics, finding it amusing seeing the twinkle of joy in his childrens' eyes.

"Help! I'm trapped; someone save me!" Kameda exclaimed; 'panic' laced in his voice as his face quickly twisted into an exaggerated expression of despair. Yukari squealed in laughter, no longer able to hold back the giggles that had been bubbling for quite some time. Honami quickly joined her as the atmosphere erupted in mischief. The two sisters worked with serious determination to carefully sculpt

the cocoon of sand into a mermaid's tail, breaking out into a fit of giggles every time Kameda pretended to wiggle free.

Under the shade of a large umbrella, Chisato rested on a nearby chair, adorning a swimsuit, straw hat and sunglasses, her hazel eyes focussed on the words of the pages in the book she was holding. The back of the long seat was slightly inclined, providing her neck a rest to comfortably read her novel. However, she was quickly snapped out of the world of words, that she had been occupied with for the past hour, to the loud exclamation of her husband, Kameda.

Glancing at the scene in front of her eyes, she couldn't help but let a soft smile grace her youthful face. The sight of her children playing with Kameda in the sand made her eyes gleam with adoration. Nevertheless, she decided to take on the role of being the responsible parent, for today at least.

"Honami, Yukari, be careful! Don't get sand in your father's eyes!" Chisato yelled out before returning to her book.

The memory ended there but Honami couldn't help but let her fingers brush over the picture of her father in the sandy mould. She had begun unconsciously stepping towards the photo whilst recalling the memory.

Honami felt like she could still hear the sounds of the waves crashing softly in the distance, with the rays of sun kissing her skin with warmth. Even though the memory felt like it had occurred a lifetime ago, it was still vivid in her mind. The feeling of togetherness and warmth that the memory invoked opened the floodgates to the lingering sadness deep in her heart, threatening to swallow her whole.

She didn't act like it but her father's absence left her heart feeling hollow. Her mother, Chisato, always had a smile on her face that reassured Honami that everything was okay, but the absence of the other half of the household left her with a lingering sense of emptiness. As her thoughts began to dwell further, she was abruptly snapped out of her trance by Yukari.

"Nami?" Yukari called out quietly, her small hands tugging on

Honami's arms while her big doe eyes looked at Honami, brimming with worry.

Honami quickly suppressed the sadness that had started to well up in her heart after seeing her younger sister, Yukari, looking at her with concern. The last thing Honami wanted was for Yukari to regress further into the tough shell that she had buried herself within after their father's absence. Honami resolved herself to always carry a smile on her face—being a symbol of strength for her younger sister, showing Yukari that she could always count on her.

The two sisters began moving towards their rooms, but their attention was quickly grabbed by the sounds coming from the living room. In the open space, Chisato stood by the window, her eyebrows furrowed slightly as she talked to someone on the phone. Her voice was soft but the tension in her tone was palpable.

"We'll be picked up? Tomorrow morning? Where are we going? Shouldn't you have given us more notice?" Chisato rapidly probed, grasping the edges of the curtains as frustration started being sprinkled in her words.

Upon glancing over her shoulder and noticing her children staring at her curiously from the hallway, Chisato decided to cut the call after a few parting words, her frustrated expression quickly morphing to her usual warm smile. But for a moment, Honami could have sworn there was a flicker of concern that flashed in her eyes.

"Welcome home, girls, did you have a good day at school?" Chisato asked with her signature smile that masked her previous emotions.

"Yes, Mama," Honami replied with her usual bright smile. Yukari nodded her head in agreement with her big sister's words.

They proceeded with their usual daily greeting, talking about the various activities completed in school. Chisato approached Yukari, crouching down with calm movements to help her with her school bag.

But Honami's thoughts dwelled on her mother's expression earlier. She couldn't help but wonder who she was talking to on the phone.

"Who were you talking to, Mama?" Honami asked whilst tilting her head lightly, carefully glancing at her mother's expression.

Maintaining her gentle smile, Chisato straightened her posture before responding, "It was your Papa."

Yukari's eyes swiftly lit up upon hearing talk about her papa, her head shaking with excitement, "Papa? What did he say?"

Chisato let out a few giggles before gently running her fingers through Yukari's hair, "Mhm, it looks like we'll be going on a little trip. Papa said that if he gets time, he might visit earlier but no promises, okay? So, I need you both to be on your best behaviour and start packing your bags."

"Okay! I'll do that now," Yukari said, her voice taking a higher pitch as she glided up the stairs towards her room, getting ready to pack her bags.

Honami didn't say anything during the whole interaction, but her eyebrows knotted hearing her mother's response, confusion clouding her eyes.

'In the middle of school? Why are we going on a trip? And Papa might be visiting earlier?'

Normally Honami would have been ecstatic at the prospect of seeing her father again but she couldn't help but find the whole scenario strange, like there was something deeper at play. The hint of concern in her mother's eyes solidified this conclusion in Honami's mind.

Ever since her father had started visiting only on Christmas, Honami had naturally matured quicker than her peers, taking on the role of protecting her younger sister as well as other duties to help her mother. Which was why she wanted to understand what was the reason behind this sudden trip and their father's possible early visit.

"Mama, is everything really okay? I don't understand why we're going on a trip so suddenly."

Chisato hazel orbs locked onto Honami's determined gaze, letting out a shallow sigh. She figured it would be fine to tell Honami some more

details to extinguish her curiosity, "I was talking to your Papa about the house. It seems that we have a bit of a problem with termites."

"Termites?" Honami asked, her expression turning puzzled. The answer she got was not something she expected.

"Yes, the house has to get fumigated, which means that we have to leave and stay someplace else. Your Papa has a friend who set up a nice villa that we can stay at for the time being."

Honami's confused face turned into one of understanding. She had heard about termites being a problem whilst learning science at school. Japan was known to have many homes built from traditionally wooden structures. Coupled with high humidity and warm weather during the summer, termites can quickly thrive and form large nests that sometimes can be difficult to remove if they are left unchecked.

'That makes sense, I guess. Termites forming nests near our house could be a problem in the future.'

The justification that Chisato gave made sense to Honami. Their house was two-story, but some parts were composed of materials vulnerable to termites. Leaving them to stew would be a mistake. It would be better to eliminate the problem before it gets worse.

Chisato lovingly placed her palm on Honami's face, gently stroking her cheeks. "You've grown up quickly Honami," her voice came out softly, inviting Honami to lean into her touch.

"Could you do me a favour? Please help out your younger sister with her packing, she can get a bit lost sometimes," Chisato requested, staring into Honami's blue eyes.

Honami let out a few light giggles, the concerns that once clouded her mind quickly disappeared. Just like Honami's smile comforted her younger sister, Yukari, Chisato's smile always reassured Honami that everything was going to be okay.

"Of course, Mama, I'll help her," Honami stated, her signature smile surfacing on her face.

"And don't think that you and Yukari can miss homework, okay? I will be calling the school to request some materials so that you are up to date," Chisato teased. She knew Honami had no issues with her studies, but Yukari was a different story. The girl seemed to be curious about a lot of things; academics was not one of them.

Bursting into a fit of giggles as she climbed the stairs, Honami imagined her younger sister's pouting face when she heard the news.

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Location: Outside Tokyo

'What is this strange scenario that I find myself in?'

Kiyotaka couldn't help but question what or rather who was standing in front of him. Two young girls with light pink hair and blue eyes stared at the young boy. One of them seemed older than the other, wearing a warm smile on her face. She looked to be of the same age as Kiyotaka. The younger one was hiding behind the older's torso, with only her head peeking out, glancing at Kiyotaka like a curious cat.

'I was given no information prior to my arrival here that I would be interacting with people other than the stationed guards in suits.'

All Kiyotaka was debriefed on when he arrived at the villa was that he had to read the books his father had set for him, which were quite a few. He wasn't provided any further instructions but suspected something was amiss when the refrigerator, that was usually empty, had been filled with produce.

The most likely conclusion that Kiyotaka had surmised from the information he had been given, and the evidence that lay in front of his eyes, was that his father was testing how well he would interact with these people. It would fit with the story that his father had presented him—getting ready to meet future investors, demonstrating etiquette and mannerism of a refined person.

But immediately concluding as such would be careless, at least from Kiyotaka's perspective. His brain worked differently. Immediately

converging to a solution wasn't how his mind was trained in the White Room. The lessons that had been carved into his brain had taught him to always consider different possibilities first, then use the information you possess to swiftly narrow down the options. From there, he would use his senses, intelligence, deductive reasoning or other means to collect external sources of data, calculating the quantitative or qualitative probability of which outcome was more likely.

Some may call this an inefficient way of thinking, but Kiyotaka's ability to quickly process, digest and understand information meant that he was at no disadvantage by carrying out such an algorithm in his mind. Keeping one's thinking objective was what the White Room had vigorously conditioned into its students, at least in the fourth generation as far as Kiyotaka was concerned. Being able to compute information at breakneck speed was a necessity as Kiyotaka advanced through the beta curriculum, the more stressful scenarios demanding a faster processing speed.

Which is why although these people had seemingly been allowed entry into the villa by the stationed guards, Kiyotaka couldn't disregard the possibility that this was a ploy by the White Room staff. To test his response to unexpected external stimuli and whether he would let his guard down when confronted with new people in a new environment. This possibility could not be eliminated because Kiyotaka did not inherently trust every word that is uttered from his father's or instructors' mouths.

Kiyotaka had witnessed with his own eyes how well information is controlled in the White Room, which is why trusting everything he heard was a mistake. It was better to objectively look at the information and store it in his long-term memory, waiting until he obtained larger pieces of the puzzle and could scrutinise what was true and what was deception.

That was how Kiyotaka had lived his entire life since birth. Only trusting his own abilities to carry him forward—to pick himself up from the hell that was the beta curriculum and climb its steep mountain, aiming for the peak and cutting down those who tried to drag him down or stood in his way. Children in the past had attempted to deceive his heart with words but he could not be

swayed, crushing them mercilessly and exposing their schemes that strove to drag him down to ruin.

Kiyotaka was abruptly pulled out of his thoughts as the older girl took a slow step forward towards him and began introducing herself.

"Hi~! My name is Ichinose Honami, but please call me Honami, it's nice to meet you~!" The older girl, Honami, said excitedly with a cheerful expression on her face, extending her right hand out towards Kiyotaka for a handshake.

It would be better to address the older girl as Honami rather than Ichinose, given that there were two other people, who had the same last name and were also staying in the villa. She figured telling the boy to address her as Honami would avoid confusion.

But Honami could not know that at the instant that she made the slightest movement, the young boy, who stood in front of her, was swiftly dissecting the meaning behind her gestures, his guard remaining up.

Kiyotaka's head tilted slightly. Although his facial expressions did not change, the slight movement of his head painted a clear picture of confusion and contemplation, one that Honami slowly began to grasp as silence ensued.

Meanwhile, in Kiyotaka's thoughts:

'What is she doing? Her movements are slow and sloppy, she can't possibly hope to achieve any successful attack with that stance.'

Kiyotaka couldn't stop himself from disregarding the possibility that the young girl had hostile intentions. Even if she adorned a smile comparable to the girl that lingered in his memories, no matter how much he suppressed it, he would not let his mind be influenced.

In the White Room, with the exception of one person, every other subject had shown Kiyotaka hostility upon leaving isolation training. Their reddened eyes shook with bloodlust when they glanced at Kiyotaka, blaming him for everything cruel that they were forced to endure. Even when Kiyotaka had driven fear into the hearts of his

'comrades', some still didn't acknowledge their inferiority, opting to continue their attempts to steer him to his demise.

'Her outstretched hand, could it be an attempt to put me into a wrist lock? No, judging by her previous actions and her stance, the possibility of this girl having undergone combat training is close to improbable.'

His mind blazed through the different possibilities, carefully considering all the information that he had been presented so far.

'But why does she seem so confident? She displays no wariness towards me. Am I not a threat in her eyes? Or does she perceive things differently than me?'

At this instant Kiyotaka lacked information. He couldn't know that it was in Honami's nature to see the best in people and always showed kindness similar to her mother, Chisato. The only real time that Honami would show anything close to 'hostility' was when her ideals were challenged or someone tried to harm or pick on her younger sister, Yukari, and any of her other family or friends.

Upon seeing that the young boy had no intention of taking her hand, Honami's bright expression dimmed as her smile began to falter slightly.

Seeing that new information had been presented, Kiyotaka reconsidered his approach and thinking.

'Alternatively, this could be a test of social etiquette. If I refuse, I may come across as hostile but if I accept, I could be playing into her hand. However, the threat is too low considering everything I've seen so far.'

Kiyotaka rapidly shifted his thinking away from analysing threats, his thoughts drifting to some of the notes that had been described in the books that his father had instructed him to read. He recalled that greetings between people were usually initiated through a handshake which involved two individuals generally outstretching their respective right hands, meeting at an intersection point for which the palms 'cup' together, engaging in a firm oscillating, vertical linear motion.

"Um...it's just a handshake," Honami mumbled, her head tilting like Kiyotaka did, reflecting nothing but confusion in her blue irises. She had never experienced such an encounter. Most people she had interacted with were quick on the uptake and shook her hand with no hesitation. Honami had experienced cases with shyer individuals who were often hesitant in engaging with verbal let alone physical contact. Given that she had matured earlier than others, largely due to her father's absence, she was easily able to read the room and understand other people's feelings.

But her first impression of Kiyotaka was different. He seemed to be aloof with an air of tranquility surrounding him despite them being of similar age. As if nothing could move the young boy's heart. She couldn't help but be intrigued by his strange demeanour. His calm and stoic attitude was a direct contrast to her warm and bubbly attitude, drawing her in like a moth to a flame.

Meanwhile, Kiyotaka had resolved himself to shake the young girl's hand, deciding not to escalate the situation further and realising that there was no danger.

'This could be an opportunity to learn more about conversation and apply some of the concepts outlined in that book. Interacting with these new people could prove to be useful in providing a new opportunity to grow.'

The book in question was "The Art of Conversation".

Kiyotaka reached his hand out cautiously, "Ayanokōji Kiyotaka," he responded concisely, his tone firm but calm.

Honami's expression immediately regained its brightness, "Hehe, that wasn't so bad, was it?" Honami teased lightly. She didn't know why but being in this young boy's presence brought out her cheekier side. One that she had suppressed after her father's absence, which had forced herself to mature to be a rock of stability for her younger sister's sake.

Yukari, who had been tentatively peeking her head around Honami's shoulder, was watching Kiyotaka carefully, her wide blue eyes sparkling with curiosity. She began lightly tugging on Honami's shirt.

Noticing her gaze, Kiyotaka redirected his attention to the younger girl, who was presumably Honami's sibling based on their similar physical features.

Honami could not help but widen her eyes after noticing her younger sister's curiosity towards the young boy. Usually, Yukari is not receptive to meeting new people, only feeling comfortable with family. This became more evident with her father's absence. Honami pondered whether the changes were attributed to the young boy's presence. However, she removed herself from such thoughts, realising that this was a good opportunity to introduce Yukari.

Meanwhile Kiyotaka questioned the girl's strange behaviour in his mind.

'This younger girl is deliberately concealing herself behind Honami, yet her eyes have never left my figure. A scout feinting hesitation to lower my guard? Or is she anticipating an attack and using Honami as a shield?'

Thoughts like this couldn't help but dwell in his mind due to his upbringing, even if the younger girl seemingly posed no threat to Kiyotaka.

"Kiyotaka, right? Can I call you that?" Honami asked, snapping the young boy out of his analysis, his head nodding in response to Honami's request.

"This little one here is Yukari, my younger sister. She's a bit shy," Honami explained, her eyes drifting down towards her younger sibling.

Having been called out by her older sister, Yukari buried her face into Honami's arm, tightening her grip.

Honami let out a soft sigh, as she slowly crouched down to Yukari's level, encouraging her to step forward. "There is nothing to be worried about Yukari, Kiyotaka won't hurt you, okay?" Honami whispered warmly into the young girl's ear.

Yukari peeked her face out from Honami's arm but quickly ducked back into cover after meeting Kiyotaka's discerning golden orbs.

"Kiyotaka...you don't have to act so stiff, we're just greeting each other," Honami sighed, wondering why the boy was acting so differently from the boys she knew from school.

"I see," Kiyotaka responded concisely, causing Honami to briefly giggle at his stoic response.

"You're so serious! We're just trying to get along, after all, we'll be living with each other for the time being."

"I see," Kiyotaka repeated, his repeated short responses made Honami pout.

Yukari tugged on her sister's sleeves to gain her attention.

"Nami, do you think he's always like this?" Yukari whispered.

A cheeky smile surfaced on Honami's face as she stifled her giggles, "Yes, I think so."

"He seem's a bit scary," Yukari added after observing his stature that was taller than Honami, as well as his piercing golden eyes that were searching them.

Honami brushed a piece of hair behind Yukari's ear before gently speaking, "No, Yukari, Kiyotaka is not scary. He's just... different, that's all."

Meanwhile Kiyotaka remained lost in his thoughts that had moved away from risk analysis.

Yukari's unease triggered memories from the White Room, where some children would often cower or flinch in his presence or when faced with his gaze. But Kiyotaka, having moved away from examining threats, understood that this circumstance was different. Rather than Yukari being hostile or terrified, she seemed to just be a child who was very shy, feeling anxious in the presence of a stranger.

Following this line of thinking, Kiyotaka thought back to how Honami offered her encouragement. Crouching down to eye level to remove the feeling of dominance exuded by a taller person, and using

reassuring words. He began simulating the movements in his mind before executing them.

"There is no need to be afraid. I mean no harm."

Copying Honami's previous actions, Kiyotaka knelt down slowly so that he was at Yukari's eye level. His gaze lost its sharpness, but his voice remained measured and calm to the point where it seemed friendly, despite the lacking warmth in his tone.

Honami's eyes widened slightly at Kiyotaka's gesture. She didn't expect him to attempt to comfort Yukari considering how stiff his behaviour was prior.

"Really...?" Yukari asked timidly, gradually loosening her grip on Honami's arm.

"Yes. You have my word."

Yukari slowly shifted away from Honami, the unease she felt early had dwindled away, replaced by a sense of wonder as she glanced at Kiyotaka, her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

"See? He's not so bad, Yukari. Kiyotaka might look serious, but he is actually pretty nice."

Seeing Kiyotaka being conisderate of Yukari made Honami smile turn wider.

Meanwhile Kiyotaka had been storing the data in his head, realising his actions had bared fruitful information.

'It seems my gestures yielded a positive outcome. I should continue to observe them, I'm sure I can learn a lot more.'

But Kiyotaka did not know that his future actions would go on to intrigue the two sisters.

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Location: Outside Tokyo

The sun had already set as the clock ticked past 9pm.

A young girl was tossing and turning in her bed, tousling the luxurious clean sheets that she lay underneath. Her long, light pink hair sprawled across her pillow as her deep blue eyes stared at the ceiling fan, watching it rotate the surrounding air, generating a turbulent flow that resembled her thoughts.

She had stayed in the villa for nearly a week. It was the longest time she had been away from home. But strangely that wasn't what occupied her mind. Instead, it was the young boy who was staying with them.

He looked the same age as her, but that wasn't what drew her towards him. The way he acted was strange. She had never seen a boy her age act like he did. Most boys her age would always be loud and noisy, often hot-headed and do immature stunts. The young girl wasn't criticising them in her head, it was just observations she had made whilst at school.

When bearing witness to such stunts she always exuded a kind and understanding demeanour—well, that's until her ideals were challenged, the warm look she adorned turning into a cat with claws. For example, she was fiercely protective of her younger sister, Yukari. Honami could never stand anyone picking on her for just being shy and quiet.

Honami was similar to her father in that respect, who also didn't compromise his ideals, always pursuing justice.

Of course, there were also boys at her school who were shy and uncomfortable, but Kiyotaka wasn't. He was just silent, always carefully observing his surroundings. Whenever she was in his presence it felt like there was an unmistakable air of calm around him that would keep her thoughts and feelings grounded.

'He's always wearing that blank expression, just like when we introduced ourselves to each other.'

The memory of their first introduction played back in her head.

She was happy that Kiyotaka was considerate of Yukari, even attempting to comfort her. But her thoughts shifted to a previous scene in the memory of their first introduction earlier in the week.

Honami let out a few giggles, remembering the way Kiyotaka had tilted his head when she held out her hand for a handshake.

'Hehe, now that I think about it, Kiyotaka tilting his head like that was adorable.'

At the time she was too distracted by the fact that the young boy didn't take her hand, but after thinking back on it, the way he tilted his head in confusion amused Honami.

As she regained her composure, her expression turned more thoughtful, and she pondered about the way the boy speaks. She noted that it was very different from the boys she knew from school. They always had something to say at any given moment, conversations often devolving into silly bantering. But Kiyotaka was different.

'Although it hurts a little when he gave such clipped answers during our introductions, he has been improving lately. Speaking with longer sentences yet can still be insensitive sometimes. But I understand why he's like that.'

After their introductions, the expressionless boy told her that he had been homeschooled his whole life, but didn't elaborate any further, to which Honami was respected. She was relatively mature despite her young age, due to her intelligence and excellent social abilities, so she knew how to read the room and understand that the subject wasn't something the boy would want to talk about. Admitting that one had been homeschooled their whole life was probably a difficult truth to tell others, at least from Honami's perspective. Which is why she didn't want to pry into his life unreasonably.

'But I know that behind that aloof look, there is kindness in his heart.'

Honami's train of thoughts soon drifted towards another memory.

"Yukari? Kiyotaka? Dinner is ready!" Honami called out to the silence

in the villa, where only the scent of her mother's cooking stimulated her senses. Honami's mother, Chisato, informed her that dinner would be ready soon and told her to bring Kiyotaka and her younger sister to the dining table.

After no response came back, a deep sigh left her lips as Honami realised that it would be best to go up to their individual rooms rather than pointlessly raising her voice. With soft steps, she trudged up the stairs and was about to knock on Kiyotaka's room, as it was the closest, but ceased her actions after hearing two voices emerging from the gap of Kiyotaka's door.

'It sounds like Kiyotaka and Yukari are both in the room....'

Her curiosity peaked. When did those two get so close?

The more mischievous side of her that had appeared during their introductions suddenly surfaced again. After her father's absence she had become more grounded—more mature, but it seems Kiyotaka's presence had influenced her without the girl knowing.

'Hehe, let's see if I can surprise Kiyotaka and change his expression. He always has that blank face.'

Planning her 'attack', she peeked her head around the edge of the door frame. Upon seeing what was in front of her eyes, a barely audible gasp left her lips.

In the room, Kiyotaka and Yukari were seated at a desk side by side in chairs, their backs to Honami. This would have been the perfect opportunity to 'scare' them but after hearing Yukari speak so much to another person, who wasn't family, she halted her movements.

Ever since their father's absence, Yukari had built a wall around herself, not letting anyone but family inside her walls. But Honami had noticed over the days spent in the villa that Kiyotaka's presence had slowly changed her behaviour, awakening the earlier innocence and curiosity that Yukari possessed before their father drifted away.

"I don't get this one. Why do the apples go away? Did someone eat them?" asked Yukari, a small frown adorning her face, as she tapped

her pencil against her chin.

'Is she doing her homework? I guess mama did ask our teachers for homework for the next few weeks since we would be away from home temporarily.'

Honami knew the reason why they had to leave school abruptly. Her mother told her that it was a temporary getaway because the house had to get fumigated to remove the termites surrounding their house. Given her intelligence, she was able to grasp the severity of the situation and didn't question further, trusting her mother's words. However, the presence of the stoic men around the house told her that there was more to the story than her mother had conveyed, possibly linked to her father's work.

But Honami was quickly distracted from these ominous thoughts when she heard the expressionless boy start speaking.

"No one ate them. The question asked you to imagine what would happen if you had ten apples and three were taken away," Kiyotaka stated with a tranquil voice. There was no sign of frustration in his tone.

Yukari tilted her head slightly, confusion palpable in her expression. "B-But, who took them? That's not fair!"

A short pause followed, before Kiyotaka continued speaking, his voice calm but with a sprinkle of gentleness.

"It doesn't matter who takes them. The important part you need to understand is how many apples are left after the three apples are removed from the ten apples."

A cute pout formed on Yukari's face as she tried to understand Kiyotaka's words.

"Okay...but it feels like stealing. That's bad."

Another pause followed, before Kiyotaka took another approach.

"Think about it this way. Picture yourself giving three apples to your older sister, Honami. How many apples would you have left after

giving her the three apples?" Kiyotaka asked with a steady voice.

"Oh! Oh! I think I know! Is it seven?" Yukari asked excitedly, her innocent blue eyes lighting up in anticipation of Kiyotaka's response.

"Exactly. They weren't lost. You just shared them. That's subtraction." Kiyotaka nodded stoically at her answer, before clinically stating the key concept.

A smile brighter than the sun emerged on Yukari's face, her eyes locking onto Kiyotaka, "Hehe, big brother Kiyo is super smart, just like big sister Nami!"

Honami couldn't help but feel like a blanket had been put over her heart. Seeing the aloof boy show so much patience and understanding while teaching her younger sister subtraction made an unexplainable warmth spread throughout her insides. Yukari struggled with maths at school, much more than the other students. Other people, including her teachers and classmates had gotten frustrated or sighed in annoyance while teaching Yukari, sometimes even ignoring her and not bothering to teach her further, thinking that it would be a waste of time.

But Kiyotaka didn't. His tone remained calm with a hint of gentleness in his words, a gentleness Honami hadn't seen before. And after seeing Yukari's joyful expression that followed after Kiyotaka taught her subtraction, she couldn't stop the biggest of smiles from emerging on her face if she wanted to.

'I can't stop smiling. Seeing Yukari returning to her innocent and curious self before our father's absence makes my heart overflow with happiness. But also...'

She noticed that in the memory, Kiyotaka had begun speaking with longer sentences, slowly moving away from giving concise and clipped answers. Knowing that, he too was warming up to her family, elevated her already blissful expression.

The memory ended there as Honami's thoughts drifted towards the many other experiences she had with the young boy over their stay. This time looking at another aspect of his behaviour, particularly

how he is always calm, even in a life-threatening situation.

Another memory began to play in Honami's head.

It was earlier in the week. Honami and Yukari decided to venture into the forest, taking careful precautions not to wander too deep into the dark green foliage.

The idea of exploring the forest had sparked due to the vast amounts of boredom Honami and Yukari had been subjected to in the fairly isolated region. Although there was cell service in case of an emergency, in terms of entertainment, there wasn't a whole lot. Board games and card games can only take you so far. Coupled with no television, no internet, and only books to read, the stay at the villa could feel quite monotonous. Although this was not an issue for Honami, her younger sister was a different story.

Yukari, whose curiosity had been awakened due to a certain young boy's presence, begged to go explore the forest. Honami was skeptical about the idea, saying that it could be dangerous. Chisato, their mother, thought the same but Yukari's puppy eyes were hard to ignore. She too, had noticed that Yukari shone with a different brightness during their stay at the villa and found it refreshing. Seeing Yukari becoming more cheerful made the mother happy.

Which is why, in the end, Chisato relented, telling them they had to not go too far in, and that she always had to be holding Honami's hand. As an added precaution, Chisato had asked Kiyotaka to join them. She judged he seemed to be quite mature for his age and trusted that he would keep them safe. Chisato didn't feel comfortable having one of the expressionless men near the house staying close to her children, even if they meant no harm. Call it "woman's intuition". Which is why she thought Kiyotaka would be a good alternative.

Honami had noticed during their stay that her mother, Chisato, liked to dote on the boy. Maybe it was because he seemed to enjoy the food Chisato served every day, his 'reactions' to consuming her cooking often being described as adorable, despite his expression never changing. Perhaps Chisato saw Kiyotaka as the son she never had.

They stopped at an area not too far away from the villa, ensuring that the house was still in sight to prevent themselves from getting lost.

Honami was momentarily distracted by Kiyotaka's strange exorbitant focus on his surroundings, in particular the fallen leaves, grass, dirt, ambient sounds, and any other parts of nature. As if it was his first time walking in a forest. He was suspiciously crouched down, carefully looking at the ground.

'What is he looking at?'

"Is there something wrong, Kiyotaka?" Honami gently asked, wondering what had captured the boy's attention.

A short pause followed, before Kiyotaka responded, his eyes remaining sharpened on the ground before dusting off his hands and looking away, "No, it's nothing."

Honami let out a soft sigh, she had noticed so many oddities with the young brown haired boy's behaviour since beginning her stay at the villa, often resulting in Kiyotaka occupying her mind.

Moments prior, Yukari's head turned slightly when she witnessed a beautiful bird flying in the distance. Abruptly letting go of Honami's hand, Yukari trudged towards the bird, her eyes shining with curiosity, unknowingly walking deeper into the vastness of the woods.

A minute passed before the missing source of warmth in her hand caused Honami's head to snap to the right, panic quickly began devastating her insides upon seeing Yukari missing.

"Yukari? Yukari?! Where did she go?!" Honami screeched, her head and body frantically twisting and turning trying to find her younger sister. "Oh my god, we were just together! Why did she—"

Kiyotaka's hand quickly but gently covered her mouth, cutting off her distressed speech before attempting to soothe her turmoil, "Deep breaths, Honami. Clear your head first."

Honami pried Kiyotaka's hand off, her eyes shaking with fright, "How are you so calm?! W-What if something b-bad happens to her?" She

asked, her voice trembling.

At that instant, Kiyotaka forcefully moved her shoulders so that their eyes met, "Panicking will not help us find Yukari. Let cool heads prevail and we will find her."

His tranquil but firm eyes immediately doused Honami's sparks of distress, taking deep breaths, her mind gradually returning to homeostasis.

Meanwhile, Kiyotaka proceeded to carefully examine the surrounding area, his mind quickly processing the sensory information that was rapidly being taken in. He crouched down again after noticing signs of footprints and broken twigs, "She went this way."

A glimmer of hope shone in Honami's eyes, as she began walking with Kiyotaka. But her tunnel vision resulted in her failing to notice Kiyotaka's eyes lingering on the ground for a moment too long.

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The atmosphere was oppressively tense whilst following the tracks. Although Honami had calmed down, her intrusive thoughts kept entering her mind, poisoning it with darker thoughts.

GROWL

An animalistic roar echoed in the distance, sending a chill down Honami's spine.

"W-What was t-that?" Honami stammered, her voice emerging as a low whisper.

Kiyotaka's eyes narrowed, pondering the clues he had witnessed earlier before responding, "It's likely a large wild animal, possibly a bear. Do not make any noise. Panicking will increase the danger."

Even with the reassurance, Honami's face was pale, but her mind was

relatively calmer thanks to Kiyotaka's presence. She swallowed a large gulp before nodding, "O-Okay...okay."

With great caution, Kiyotaka moved with through the thicket of dense foliage, Honami following closely behind, copying his actions and posture to minimise the sound.

In an opening of the foliage, peeking behind an assortment of bushes, the duo saw Yukari hiding behind a rock, fear painted on her face and hands shaking in terror at the approaching wild animal. Kiyotaka's prediction was correct, it was indeed a bear, specifically an Asian black bear.

But this bear was abnormally large for a typical Asian black bear. Its black fur had signs of dried blood, but the animal did not look hurt, suggesting it had a particular taste for meat, atypical behaviour considering most Asian black bears feed on berries, fruits or leaves. Usually, Asian black bears are timid and shy, generally avoiding humans, but this one seemed quite aggressive. Kiyotaka had noticed faint traces of prints near the villa at the time when Yukari wandered off. The fact that it wasn't afraid to scavenge for food near a villa inhabited by humans meant the lone bear believed it was the apex predator. Perhaps it had experience with attacking humans in the past.

A gasp left Honami's mouth, tears threatening to break from her eyes before she forcefully put a hand over her mouth to stifle her cries.

'She's been hiding this whole time...but, how—what can we do?'

Honami's mind was in disarray, her body frozen upon seeing the hurdling large predator, and her younger sister hiding behind the rock. She didn't know how to rescue her sister from the beast.

Suddenly, the bear started growling, its heightened senses picking up motion in its surroundings before gradually moving, causing small crunching sounds to fill the atmosphere with tension, as its large paws touched the ground.

The bear's movements continued to disturb Honami's thoughts, making it difficult for her to remain calm in the dangerous situation.

But Kiyotaka was different. He remained stoic, unaffected by the presence of the predator in front of his golden eyes, calmly assessing the situation. With a steady breath and a controlled voice, he whispered to Honami, "Stay still. The bear isn't aware of our presence. We need to keep it that way, at least for the time being."

Despite her shaking hands gripping tightly on her skirt, Honami nodded to Kiyotaka's words. But she couldn't help but wonder how the young boy, who was the same age as her, remained so unaffected in the presence of such a terrifying animal, a complete contrast to the nerves bubbling within her.

"W-What do we do? Do you have a p-plan?" Honami stammered, barely whispering the words through the lump in her throat.

Kiyotaka's golden irises shifted back to Honami after finishing his analysis, "First, avoid large movements that can produce loud noise. It may alert it to our presence and attack. We must wait for the right moment. You keep watch, I can move very quickly and quietly so I will rescue her."

At first, she wanted to protest his willingness to put himself in danger given that it was her responsibility, but she wasn't confident in her success. So, Honami reluctantly nodded, her eyes shifting back to the bear that had just raised its head, sniffing the air. Its actions made Honami's heart drum against her chest, but she forced herself to take deep breaths, flicking her blue orbs back to Yukari, who had noticed their presence but remained frozen.

Kiyotaka carefully navigated behind the bushes, approaching Yukari with utmost stealth, "Yukari, stay behind the rock. It won't see you if you don't move."

His voice was barely audible but there was a trace of gentleness in his tone, the same he had used when he helped Yukari with her homework.

Despite the fear she was feeling, Yukari's shaky blue eyes locked onto Kiyotaka before gradually stabilising, her head nodding, subsequently obeying his orders.

At that moment, the bear turned away from the rock, its eyes scanning the other direction. Kiyotaka, with no hesitation, quickly used the opportunity, darting out of the bushes and grabbing Yukari with precise, calculated movements, pulling her into the safety of the thick greenery.

The bear's torso snapped back to the source of disturbance, emitting another growl before beginning to sniff the air again.

Upon witnessing no further movement, the bear turned away, seemingly uninterested in the faint rustling of the nearby bushes, disappearing into the dense foliage.

Honami let out a deep breath, her eyes drifting to Yukari who was gripping tightly on Kiyotaka's arm, nestling her face into safety.

"It's gone, for now," Kiyotaka stated clinically, bringing Yukari to Honami before continuing his instructions, "I made markings for us to follow to get back safely as a precaution."

That was news to Honami, her eyes widening in disbelief. She must've been too absorbed in her thoughts of finding Yukari to notice Kiyotaka subtly leaving behind a trail to follow.

Her mind quickly filled with thoughts of Kiyotaka as she grasped her sister, tightly hugging her whilst looking at his sturdy, straight back that seemed larger than normal. His calm demeanour and unshakable confidence made her feel safe.

"W-What should we do now?" Honami whispered, gently letting go of the hug with Yukari before holding her hand tightly.

Kiyotaka glanced over his shoulder, before proceeding to examine the surroundings, "It might circle back, so let's wait a little longer before moving back.

Attempting to ignore the tremble of her legs, Honami gently nodded at Kiyotaka before glancing at her younger sister, Yukari, who still seemed shaken.

"I-I don't know how you stayed so calm," Honami mumbled out softly, more to herself than Kiyotaka.

His eyes returned to Honami briefly before continuing to look at the surroundings, causing a small pause to ensue before his measured voice emerged, "Panicking will never solve the problem. Thinking objectively and calmly increases the probability of survival. Letting emotions cloud one's judgement will lead to one's downfall."

His words were devoid of any emotion, but despite that, they comforted Honami greatly. At that moment, she felt like she could trust the young boy completely.

The memory ended there.

They did get severely chewed out by Chisato when they returned. Honami took responsibility, knowing that she should have paid more attention to her younger sister. Of course, she would also educate her younger sister in private. However, the aftermath is not what occupied Honami's mind.

'How is he so levelheaded? He knew exactly what to do in such a dangerous situation, yet he never panicked. Not even once. When my sister was lost, he swiftly found a solution whilst keeping my mind from shattering. He proceeded to rescue my sister, taking bold but decisive action despite the presence of the scary beast.'

Honami's face started to warm as she thought more about him. His ability to remain calm throughout the encounter, as well as locating and bravely rescuing Yukari, made him look heroic—almost like a prince from a novel. She was sure he was someone she could rely on.

'His golden eyes are always tranquil and make me feel at ease, but there was another time when I saw a different side of him.'

Her cheeks kept their red hue as she began playing another memory in her head.

In the memory, it was late at night. Honami was craving a snack, preferably something sweet.

Carefully lifting her sheets, she tiptoed towards the door, opening and closing it gently so as to not wake up her younger sister, Yukari, who slept on a separate bed in her room. She was planning to eat ice

cream that she saw in the fridge earlier in the week.

Softly stepping down the stairs, her eyes saw that the kitchen light was on.

'Huh? Who's up so late?'

Sneaking around the corner, she saw something unbelievable.

Kiyotaka was sat at the dining table, gulping down the ice cream that she had seen earlier in the week. **Her icecream**.

Honami's eyebrows furrowed and a pout quickly emerged on her face.

'This baka. Does he really plan to eat all of it?'

She was about to give him a piece of her mind by putting on the 'fiercest' expression she could muster, ready to confront the young boy. But that plan fell apart when she saw his face.

Although his expression hadn't changed much on the surface, Honami knew there was something inherently different. As she stared into the windows to his soul, she saw a different picture. It wasn't his usual calmness or tranquil look that his eyes reflected, but something deeper. Like she was staring at the purest form of innocence on the planet, his normally serene golden orbs radiating a silent joy. The view hypnotized her.

'I've never seen his eyes like that...'

Honami couldn't help but want to see his eyes twinkle like that again. So, she decided not to disturb him and just observe him, 'subtly' peeking her head around the corner.

The memory ended there.

She couldn't know at the time, but Kiyotaka had already noticed her presence long ago. The boy would go on to wonder why Honami was staring at him so intently. If Honami knew that, she might have buried her head under sand and reinforced it with cement to hide her embarrassment.

Honami's cheeks tinged with hints of red turned a shade birghter whilst recounting the memory, particularly Kiyotaka's eyes, giving way to a shyer expression.

'It's too hot. I need a drink.'

Carefully lifting her sheets, she took a glance at her younger sister, Yukari, checking whether her tousling had woken her or not. After confirming that she was still sound asleep, Honami gently opened and closed the door, beginning her descent down the stairs.

'Hmm? The lights in the kitchen are on.'

She felt a sense of deja-vu. Was Kiyotaka really eating more ice cream? But there was no more left. It must be something else. That's what she thought, until she heard the solemn mutterings of a familiar voice.

"Kameda...why couldn't you let it go? Why couldn't you just be with us instead of chasing after them?"

Seeing her mother, Chisato, sitting on the dining table, with a miserable expression, was an unwelcome new sight for Honami. Chisato's palms rested on top of her head and Honami could see the faint signs of tears dropping from her cheeks. An untouched steaming cup of tea lay in front of Chisato, a testament to her turbulent feelings that were beginning to swallow her whole. There was no one else in the room, just her mother letting out the emotions she buried deep.

"Your—no, **our** daughters, they miss you everyday. They ask why you have to stay away from us. Do you not understand how hard it is to look into their eyes and tell them a white lie?"

Sobs started to break out uncontrollably, creating a stabbing pain in Honami's chest. The earlier heat she felt no longer present as the icy cold water of the truth of her mother's feelings doused her. Ever since Honami's father had been absent from her life, she had never seen Chisato so miserable, but now, Honami couldn't help but question how many times her mother had broken down like this in secret.

"You barely told me anything over the phone. Just that some associates would pick us up and take us someplace 'safe'. But are we even safe here? Do you not realise that I only feel safe when you're by my side? We need you—**I need you**."

Honami's eyes started to water hearing the pain in her voice, her heart started palpitating rapidly. She felt like her world had been tipped outside down.

'Safe? Why wouldn't we be safe? Is someone after us? Is it related to papa's work?'

Her emotions were like a trainwreck, similar to her mother's.

After Chisato had stopped her mumblings, Honami swiftly glided up the steps, moving towards the balcony for fresh air to alleviate her ragged breathing.

But as she was about to open the sliding door, she saw a sight that made her eyes stop watering, instead widening in awe.

Kiyotaka stood leaning on the balcony, his figure illuminated by the light of the full moon, as he stared off into the starry, night sky. Loose strands of his brown hair fluttered gently with the wind. But the detail that captured Honami's attention the most was his eyes. They shone with a different shade of gold as he gazed off into the stars. It felt like for a brief moment, Honami got another peak behind the expressionless mask he wore every day. His golden orbs resembled those of a fledgeling getting ready to take flight, flying anywhere it desired.

Honami covered up her miserable expression, wiping away her tears, and plastered a smile on her face, not wanting Kiyotaka to see her being weak.

She carefully opened the sliding door, trying to be as discreet as possible, but Kiyotaka noticed immediately, his guard going up as his eyes turned to their normal calm that Honami was familiar with.

"Sorry, I just needed some fresh air. Do you mind if I join you?" Honami asked softly, peeking at Kiyotaka's face with her hands

behind her back.

A pause followed where Kiyotaka observed her carefully, particularly her attire, making Honami fidget slightly, avoiding his piercing gaze.

"No, I don't mind. Feel free," Kiyotaka responded, making space for Honami to stand beside him.

The smile on Honami's face turned wider as she shyly stood beside him, glancing at the stars in the night sky.

After a moment of silence Honami tried to initiate a conversation, knowing that Kiyotaka starting a conversation would be unlikely.

"Do you like looking at them, Kiyotaka? Looking at the stars?" Honami queried, maintaining her soft tone.

Kiyotaka's head turned to Honami before looking back at the night sky and speaking with a measured voice, "I don't like nor dislike them. They're just hot, spherical masses of hydrogen and helium held together by their own gravity."

A soft giggle escaped Honami's lips after hearing such an answer. She couldn't help but think that it was just like the response she would expect from Kiyotaka. His words quickly awoke her mischievous side.

"Kiyotakaaa, what sort of answer is that? It was a "yes" or "no" question, silly," Honami teased the suffocating feelings that she felt earlier after hearing her mother's pain were gone.

Upon digesting her words, Kiyotaka's eyes flickered with something Honami couldn't quite grasp as she gazed into his golden irises. As if they were vulnerable but only for a split second.

A comfortable silence followed before Kiyotaka confronted the young girl's earlier troubles.

"You were crying. Why?"

Honami's eye widened momentarily before shrinking back, realising that the ever-observant Kiyotaka would see through her feelings.

The previous incident involving the bear had solidified her trust in Kiyotaka, which was why she felt like she could open up to the young boy in front of her. That and the fact that his demeanor, posture, and expression exuded that of an adult, ready to listen to a child's sorrows.

Recounting her turmoil, she explained in detail what she heard, including extra details about her father and his absence, glancing up occasionally to check whether he was listening or not, only to find his piercing eyes staring at her and his head nodding occasionally.

"I hated seeing her so sad but how do I help her? What can I possibly do for her?" Honami asked Kiyotaka helplessly, her emotions clouding her judgement, making her unable to come up with a solution. Her eyes watered slightly as she recalled her mother's turmoil.

A tense pause followed. Kiyotaka remained motionless, considering her words but not taking any action to comfort the young girl—until he started speaking.

"Be strong for her. Even if your father's absence makes you feel sad and empty. Show her that you're okay, that you can handle it. That you can support her and your sister. Be that beacon of hope for her and your younger sister. Show them that better days will come forth. I believe—no, I know that only **you** could pull off such a feat."

Honami's eyes widened and her breathing hitched, taking in the young boy's words. Did he really think that highly of her? That she had the strength to be the light to navigate the darkness that their family found themselves in? Initially, she doubted those thoughts.

She wanted to protest, telling him that she was weak minded, too fragile. But that firm and absolute look in his golden eyes swayed her from doing such a thing. Him believing in her gave her confidence. That she could be that person for her family.

Honami felt her cheeks warm again. Despite his voice being as blank as his expression, the words that left his mouth had touched her heart, as it started racing, but for a completely different reason that Honami couldn't quite understand.

"T-Thank you, Kiyotaka," her voice came out with a quiver as she gently wiped her tears away, suddenly feeling very shy in his presence.

As they stood in the silence, staring up at the night sky, she couldn't help but steal glances at the young boy.

'He says I can be a symbol of hope for my family, but the truth is that he is my source of hope. A light that guides me through my own dark thoughts.'

She couldn't help but think he was someone extraordinary. But the more she thought of him, the more she wondered about his past. True, she knew he was homeschooled his whole life, but that was it. They were the same age, yet, as she recalled the incident with the wild beast, her mind filled with the same questions at the time of the event. How could he remain so grounded, so calm? That sort of level-headedness is not normal, even for an adult, let alone a child.

'What kind of life have you lived to possess such strength, Kiyotaka?'

Honami felt like she was staring at a mountain that couldn't be moved.

That single thought occupied her amidst their silence and her 'subtle' glances at the young boy.

When she looked at him, she saw a child who possessed the wisdom of an adult. Making her that more interested to learn about him.

She didn't know the truth regarding why the boy was staying here in this villa, but that didn't matter. In this moment, she couldn't help but be glad she had met the young boy.

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After some time, Honami decided that it would be best if she went to bed. Honami looked at the boy, whose eyes were focused on the

scenery in front of them. His eyes suddenly snapped back to hers, causing Honami to quickly avert her gaze, feeling it difficult to meet his golden orbs.

"I-I think I'll go to bed now. Good night, K-Kiyotaka," Honami stuttered.

Kiyotaka briefly studied Honami and her response before speaking, "Good night, Honami. I'll stay here a little while longer."

Upon hearing his response, Honami did something unexpected, something she didn't even know why she did, making Kiyotaka's eyes widen momentarily by her movement.

With a face so red despite the cold of the night, she scurried away from the balcony back into the safety of her room.

'I can't believe I did that...'

Whilst getting back into bed, her thoughts drifted to the bold act she just committed. But as her eyes abruptly shifted down to her attire, panic began to quickly surge in her stomach.

'Eeeek! I was still wearing my pyjamas that whole time! What is wrong with me?!?'

Her red face started boiling, causing her to quickly bury her head beneath the bed sheets in embarrassment.

Meanwhile, the young boy, who had stared at her retreating figure, was contemplating what just happened. His palm slowly rubbed over his cheek.

For the first time in a long time, his cold heart felt a flicker of warmth. A warmth that the boy, unknowingly, wouldn't mind experiencing again.

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A/N: This was a tough chapter to write especially considering how young the characters are. However, despite that, I aimed to keep the progression as natural as possible and I believe I

achieved that.

With regards to the encounter with the bear, I did some research and found out there have been sightings of Asian black bears near the outskirts of Tokyo. With that in mind, I don't think it's unrealistic for them to have encountered an Asian black bear.

Source:

https://japannews.yomiuri.co.jp/society/general-news/20240731-201859/#:~:text=There%20were%20160%20reports%20of,head%20of%20the%20Ome%20police.

Nevertheless, I hope you enjoyed the chapter.

V0 - Chapter 7: Genesis

Location: Outer Tokyo

It was early morning; traffic was very light.

The day that Atsuomi was set to travel had arrived.

A group of men dressed in dark, tactical clothing were waiting in position near a long, curved, two-way tunnel, their faces obstructed by masks. In the midst of these people stood a tall and gaunt man at the centre.

"Alright, everyone listen up and listen well, because I'm not going to explain this again," Sugimoto announced to the crowd.

Everyone turned their attention to Sugimoto, the individual put in charge of leading the ground operatives, composed of Naoe's subordinates and Isomaru's aides, who would carry out the assassination of Atsuomi. He was the primary target with his son being the secondary objective. In other words, as long as Atsuomi was killed, the mission was a success. The death of Atsuomi's son would just be icing on the cake.

"Our latest intel revealed that the target will be travelling today in a convoy of large black SUVs that have armored windows and tires. The target will be sitting in the middle SUV. The first step is to immobilise the SUVs. We will deploy wheel clamps to lock their tires, using blockades as a countermeasure if the wheel locks fail," Sugimoto explained.

A sturdily built man, who had been listening, could no longer hold himself back from asking a critical question.

"How are we going to open their doors? If they just keep them locked, how will we reach the target?"

The sudden question made Sugimoto pause before his gaze quickly snapped to the well-built man, glaring at him in annoyance.

"Leave questions till I've finished my explanation. Any more interruptions will result in punishment directly from Naoe-sensei."

His mouth immediately shut, and his body straightened. He did not want to incur Naoe's wrath.

"As I was saying, once the target is locked in place we will deploy the battering rams that we were provided by one of our partners," Sugimoto said through gritted teeth.

The so-called battering rams, as well as the deployable wheel clamps, were supplied by Ryosuke, proving that his resourcefulness would be critical in ensuring that the assassination was carried out smoothly. But that didn't mean that Sugimoto was happy with Ryosuke's involvement, after all, Sugimoto was Naoe's right hand man and was aware of Ryosuke's true motives. Nevertheless, he continued his explanation.

"The windows are bulletproof but not impenetrable, if enough blunt force is applied to the windows, they will eventually fracture under the high impact fatigue loading,"

The men looked visibly confused by his explanation, inducing a sigh from Sugimoto who realised that they weren't familiar with the words he had used or they did not have cognitive ability to comprehend Sugimoto's words.

"Simply put, hit the glass enough with the battering ram and the glass will break, allowing us access to the target," Sugimoto stated before he pointed to a few burly men, "You lot will be in charge of breaking the glass using the battering rams."

Upon seeing the powerfully built men nod to his command, Sugimoto laid out the remaining details in the plan.

"While breaking down the windows, our remaining forces will be deployed from both directions, climbing over the barricades to pincer the enemy, forcing them to fight a battle on two fronts. According to

our intel, the security team aren't carrying any weapons, at worst they could be carrying a baton or on the very rare chance, a stun gun. Which is why all of you will be using various melee weapons to execute the target's security team, the last thing we want is to use guns and leave a trail from any bullets we fire. Remember we want to carry out this operation as quickly and quietly as possible."

Japan has some of the strictest gun control laws in the world, making it very difficult to procure any sort of firearms. Even with Ryosuke's involvement, his influence is not good enough to eliminate all traces that could implicate them, especially since they have a very small window of time to obtain the weapons given their low preparation time.

Guns would naturally draw more attention when fired and be harder to remove the trail of their source.

One could say that explosives could have been used but that would bring too many unknown variables. For starters, Takahashi was only responsible for creating a route for the convoy from a specific point—he had no knowledge of where the vehicles were located before that point, making it impossible to plant a bomb on the SUV. Furthermore, even if he possessed such knowledge, the security team would have sweeped the SUVs thoroughly before letting the VIP inside the vehicle. If they realised there was a bomb attached to the SUVs then the operation would go up in smoke.

Bombing the tunnel, although sounds appealing, would raise too many eyeballs even with Ryosuke's added resources, which could compromise the mission. The Public Security Intelligence Agency (PSIA) closely monitors purchases of any bomb making materials, even setting up bait on the dark web to catch individuals. Given their short time frame to prepare for the assassination, it would be incredibly risky to procure enough materials, even with Ryosuke's assistance. This is because Ryosuke does not have sufficient influence to pull off such a feat without alerting intelligence bureaus. Therefore, in the first place, it was already close to impossible to manufacture or purchase the explosives, in the short preparation time, without alerting organisations like the PSIA.

Assuming the impossible does occur and they do successfully

manufacture the explosives in the short preparation time without alerting the PSIA, bombing the tunnel could weaken the structural integrity of the foundations keeping the bridge stable, risking its collapse. As a result, the attack could be deemed a "terrorist attack" or "threat to national security", which could bring way too much 'heat', encouraging deeper investigations from both the PSIA and National Police Agency Security Bureau, thus, increasing the risk of their exposure and subsequent arrest. If Atsuomi also somehow survives the attack, the loud ringing of explosions will undoubtedly immediately alert the police or residents even if the location of the assault is relatively isolated. Thereby creating more variables of risk, especially during their 'clean up' process, for which they will have less time to escape smoothly.

With the same assumption in mind, bombing any other part of the route before the tunnel is also risky. Even if traffic is light, there is a significant risk of civilian life being killed by the explosives, inviting deeper investigation from the PSIA and National Police Agency Security Bureau that could compromise their operations. Although assassinating a political official will inevitably invite a thorough investigation, a terrorist attack would be more severe and be labelled a national security risk, inviting bigger players like the JSDF and maybe even foreign organisations to interfere.

In short, even if Atsuomi's assassination is successful by using explosives, they will be at serious risk of their plans being uncovered and thus caught, rendering the mission's purpose redundant. Ryosuke's added resources won't be able to guarantee avoiding detection primarily due to the limited preparation time they had for the assassination.

Therefore, from the perspective of Naoe, Isomaru, and Ryosuke, the alternative of boxing Atsuomi in and deploying men with melee weapons, that produce minimal sound, was the best course of action. They will have more time to execute the mission, especially since it is relatively more difficult to carry out a successful call for help to the police due to the terrain of the tunnel interfering with the transmission of radio waves.

Additionally, by using melee weapons, the 'clean up' process will be a lot easier as there will be close to no physical evidence left behind if

the melee weapons, battering rams, and deployable wheel clamps are all properly disposed of. The melee weapons are already available on hand, and even if they aren't, they can be easily acquired without catching stray eyes from intelligence bureaus, thus, increasing the probability of success of the mission without being caught. Therefore, no matter how hard investigators look, they won't be able to find a trace—well, that is assuming there is no betrayal between the major players like Ryosuke, Naoe, or Isomaru.

"Once we have confirmed the target has been eliminated, we will carry out the 'clean up' process that I'm sure you're all aware of. But everything has to be completed quickly before the armed police inevitably arrive. So, are there any questions?"

Upon being prompted for queries, a man in the back raised his voice, "Yeah, how will we know when to get in position? I mean we could miss the timing if we aren't ready."

Sugimoto pondered his question briefly before answering.

"You don't need to worry about that, I will keep you updated and inform you of when to carry out the orders. Any more questions?"

Silence ensued. Sugimoto quickly concluded that everyone was up to date with the details and understood the plan. They had been debriefed earlier during the set up, but it was always good to remind their operatives to ensure everything proceeded as planned. He walked away from his subordinates before bending his neck slightly.

"Everything is in order, awaiting intelligence from the surveillance team, over," Sugimoto whispered into his earpiece, a hint of bitterness in his tone.

"Affirmative, ground team leader. We will keep you updated on the target's location, over and out."

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Meanwhile, at a distance away from the assassination location, a web of vehicles with surveillance equipment were parked in obscure locations to avoid detection.

Normally, Naoe's aides and Isomaru's men would have also been stationed at both the ground team and surveillance squad but due to their decrease in popularity, the resources and manpower they once possessed had greatly diminished. As a result, their 'ally', Ryosuke, filled in the gaps, insisting that his men will be responsible for carrying out surveillance, ensuring that the ground team had the best chance of success in the operation.

All the vehicles were reporting information to the central communications team, stationed in a separate vehicle. A tall-lean man wearing a pair of thin-rimmed glasses was seated behind his subordinates, watching the details depicted on the monitors as the sounds of clicking and tapping filled his ears.

'The latest intel from Naoe's and Isomaru's informant, Takahashi, told us that Ayanokōji-sensei and his son were travelling today and confirmed their entry into the middle SUV.'

"Sir, the convoy is enroute to the tunnel. Surveillance teams one and two confirmed that the estimated time of arrival at the tunnel will be five minutes," one of the subordinates reported, glancing over his shoulder towards his direct superior seated behind him.

"Excellent," Hasegawa responded with satisfaction, getting up from his seat and exiting the vehicle momentarily. He proceeded to swiftly set up a secure line to his boss, Ryosuke. The line rang twice before being answered.

"The plan is proceeding smoothly, sir, we have visual confirmation of the convoy following the expected route. The double agent, Takahashi, confirmed that both the target target and his son had entered the middle SUV." Hasegawa clinically stated.

"Good, keep me updated on the progress of the assault and our movements that follow, Hasegawa. Our own operations will follow after the mission's success," Ryosuke's voice replied over the line.

"Will do, sir," Hasegawa concluded, cutting off the line before setting up a different communication line to inform their ground team of the updates, swiftly moving back towards the surveillance vehicle after completing said tasks.

Just as he was about to enter the surveillance room, the sound of multiple footsteps in the vicinity could be heard.

Before Hasegawa could even react, he was met with a fearsome force of several armed figures, adorning tactical black gear, head protection, dark balaclavas, and G36 assault rifles, all pointing their rifles at Hasegawa.

"Freeze!" One of the operators, presumably the commander of the unit, barked.

'What the fuck!? Why are these people here?'

Hasegawa couldn't help but ask such questions after seeing the insignia inscribed on their vests, his heart started beating rapidly.

'National Police Agency Security Bureau? How did they find out about our operations?'

His mind was racing as the heavily armed men proceeded to apprehend his subordinates situated in the surveillance vehicles. In his mind it was impossible for any form of law enforcement to have caught a wiff of their movements, but since they had that could only mean one thing.

'Our entire plot was exposed prior to its execution. They knew the exact contents of all our preparations and swiftly captured us, effectively cutting off our communications with the ground team at the perfect time. The ground team won't suspect anything amiss until it's too late because I had already informed them of Ayanokōji-sensei's convoy being enroute.'

This was an even more ridiculous thought. How could the assassination of Atsuomi have been exposed? Did someone in the organisation betray them? Did Naoe and Isomaru betray them?

'No. Naoe and Isomaru would not risk the integrity of the mission, at least not until the target is dead. Their primary objective was to eliminate

Ayanokōji-sensei, so there would be nothing to gain by betraying us now.'

That could only mean one thing. A third party had entered the game.

'Wait... if the plan is compromised then that means...'

Hasegawa slowly pieced things together, swiftly realising that they weren't the hunters anymore, rather they were the hunted.

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Meanwhile, back at the ground team, Sugimoto started handing out orders to his subordinates after receiving confirmation, from the surveillance team, of the convoy being shortly enroute.

'Everything is set, the deployable wheel clamps and barricades at the end of the tunnel have been placed. Once they see the end of the tunnel it will already be too late, their wheels will be clamped, and the entrance will be sealed off.'

A small grin emerged on Sugimoto's face. Everything felt like it was going according to plan.

'Once this operation is a success, we will begin tampering with the evidence on sight, ensuring that it will link back to Ryosuke in the end.'

Sugimoto's thoughts evolved to the aftermath of the assassination, and how he plans to scapegoat Ryosuke on behest of orders from Naoe. Given that there was a possibility of a traitor being within their circle, evident by the fact that Ryosuke had caught onto their plans, Naoe had instructed the only person he could trust, Sugimoto, to make the necessary preparations to frame Ryosuke after Atsuomi had been killed. Isomaru had also agreed with this line of logic.

Amidst the ambient sounds of birds, cicadas and the rustling of leaves from the wind, the roaring of engines slowly increased in amplitude, disturbing the peaceful silence.

'It's time.'

With his senses heightened, Sugimoto quickly broke away from his prior thoughts to fully prepare for the oncoming convoy of cars.

Shortly afterwards, large black SUVs passed through the long tunnel, but their engines started howling as their wheels locked and the vehicles came to a screeching halt.

"Block the entrance, now!" Sugimoto communicated to his subordinates before his eyes turned back, "All of you, get the battering rams ready, we need to penetrate those windows."

There was no sign of any movement from the doors of the SUVs, indicating that they had no intention of leaving their vehicles. Since that was the case, it was time to use the battering rams.

Naoe's aides and Isomaru's men, dressed in dark tactical clothing with masks moved together from both sides of the tunnel, locking on to the SUVs trapped in the middle of the curved tunnel.

But as soon as the last of Sugimoto's subordinates stepped into the tunnel, the SUV doors slammed open, the sight that confronted Sugimoto's eyes made his heart sink. His ground team stopped in their tracks immediately.

'Wha—this is not Ayanokōji-sensei's security team! They are fucking officers from the National Police Agency of Japan! Why the fuck are they here instead of Atsuomi's security team?'

Based on the insignia, it showed that they were part of the Security Bureau, a department within the National Police Agency.

"Drop your weapons to the side and get on the fucking floor or we will open fire!" a loud voice reverberated through the long tunnel.

Although they had greater numbers, in terms of firepower, they were severely outmatched. Running at the National Police Agency officers who are armed with fully automatic assault rifles would be the stupidest decision to make—yet, some of Naoe's and Isomaru's men, from the ground team stuck in the tunnel, decided to make such a choice in panic.

Blood quickly splattered everywhere, painting the floor and walls of the tunnel in red as the men were riddled with bullets. Sounds of bodies falling and bullets firing echoed throughout the tunnel, a testament to the bloodshed that was ensuing.

However, Sugimoto was different, and he immediately retreated, realising that the assassination was already an impossibility. At this moment his only objective was to inform Naoe that the plan had gone awry and that he had to take measures to protect himself.

"Naoe! Naoe? Fuck! I can't get a secure line," Sugimoto growled, his fingers probing his earpiece as he continued to sprint away from the bloodshed.

'Even if the terrain of the tunnel is interfering with communications, I had already tested the line prior and it worked relatively fine when inside the tunnel, only a few instances of static. So why has it stopped working completely?'

That single thought occupied him as he dashed towards the exit of the tunnel.

Just as he was about to exit by climbing over the barricades, a team of National Policy Agency officers were already waiting for him.

"Freeze! Or we will open fire!" One of the officers barked at Sugimoto, his weapon pointing straight at Sugimoto's face, forcing Sugimoto to halt his movements.

'What? How did they get in from behind—'

His thoughts stopped upon seeing the traces of rope attached to the bridge above the tunnel, indicating they had repelled down from the bridge to ambush anyone trying to flee.

'But the surveillance team should have warned me that law enforcement was on their way and were occupying the bridge above, unless...'

Even though his heart was pounding, he slowly connected the dots.

'It seems the surveillance team was compromised, or they have already been captured. But how could that be possible?'

The only way such a thing would be possible is if the plan was exposed from the start. Someone had covertly given detailed information to the authorities ahead of time.

'Could it have been the alleged traitor who had previously exposed us to Ryosuke? No, that's impossible. Ryosuke wouldn't make a move against us until Atsuomi had been eliminated, another party is involved here. Someone who knew everything from the start...'

As he was pushed to the ground and handcuffed, similar to the remaining ground team situated in the tunnel, his head turned towards the now unbarricaded tunnel, the colour quickly draining from his face upon seeing a sharply dressed man emerging from the middle SUV.

*'No... if this was a set up from the start, why are **you** here? What do you have to gain by being at the location of your own assassination?'*

It was illogical to Sugimoto. If you knew from the start that someone was aiming for your life, then why would you purposefully put yourself in front of the crosshairs?

The screeching sounds of car tiers could be heard in the distance from both sides of the tunnel, as various individuals with high-definition cameras and microphones quickly approached the incident after exiting their vehicles. Their presence sent Sugimoto's mind spiralling.

'Reporters? This quickly? How did they know about what was occurring here? Why are they—'

But at that instant, everything finally clicked. His racing mind had gradually calmed down and the puzzle pieces started to come together. Ryosuke's surveillance team falling apart, inaccurate information from Takahashi regarding the security personnel, the failed assassination, reporters arriving here early, and **that man's** presence at the scene.

But these thoughts and conclusions were useless because Sugimoto and his ground team were no longer pieces on the board, unable to influence the new tide of events that would shake Japan.

Location: Tokyo

Meanwhile in a more secluded region, the lights of an abandoned warehouse were powered on. The nearby grass had grown long, and windows were boarded with wooden planks, a testament to the lack of maintenance carried out at the compound.

Groups of suited men were stationed outside from a distance of the warehouse as well as inside the building, thoroughly analysing their surroundings for potential threats to the VIPs inside the compound.

Inside the building, Isomaru and Naoe were seated at opposite ends of a steel table, their behaviour a direct contrast to one another. Whilst Isomaru was casually leaning back in his chair, drinking sake, Naoe was drumming his fingers along the table.

"What's the problem, Naoe? You seem unusually tense," Isomaru asked, putting his glass of sake down whilst eyeing up Naoe's hands.

"Nothing... it's just too quiet. The operation should be underway now, but I still haven't got any feedback from Sugimoto," Naoe replied, his eyes meeting Isomaru momentarily before drifting towards his burner phone.

"I'm sure they're just finishing up now, you'll probably receive a call soon," Isomaru reassured, before refilling his glass and chugging it down.

Naoe didn't bother responding because his mind was in disarray.

'Everything may seem fine on the surface, but my instincts are screaming at me, telling me that something is off.'

It wasn't just the silence of the warehouse that disturbed Naoe but the events that had passed by during the past days leading up to the assassination.

'I still was not able to determine the source of the leak for which Ryosuke was able to maintain his information due to the limited time frame. I've been checking over the men who oversaw Natsue's kidnapping but there is

nothing out of the ordinary.'

Transfer of unusual amounts of cash, odd meeting times, or anything similar, Naoe couldn't find a trace of it. Which meant there were only two possible conclusions, at least from Naoe's perspective. Either someone got too loose with their lips, and it got leaked to lower-level members of his faction, which are more likely to contain spies. Or the rat is very good at covering their tracks.

This was inconsequential for the moment because in the meantime, Naoe had tasked Sugimoto with carrying out the countermeasures against Ryosuke, knowing that Sugimoto was the only person he could trust with this.

'But still, why hasn't Sugimoto called me yet? It's—'

Naoe was abruptly pulled out of thoughts as the large industrial lights above let out a low ominous hum.

Thrum* * Clunk* *Zzzt

The abandoned building was immediately plunged into darkness, only the faintest lines of sunlight escaping through the small gaps in the roughly boarded-up windows.

"What the fuck? Power cut?" Isomaru cursed out into the darkness, the anger in his voice slowly gave way to panic.

Naoe felt an ominous feeling churning in his stomach. Having been deprived of sight, he instinctively reached for the flashlight lodged in his back pocket but abruptly stopped his movements upon feeling a hint of hot liquid splatter on his cheek, some of it entering his mouth.

His other senses had sharpened to compensate for the lack of visibility, resulting in his nose picking up the familiar scent of blood in the air and its dominant metallic taste in his mouth, sending his mind racing.

'What?! Blood?! Have we been attacked?! Who moved against us? No... is it Ryosuke's men? Have they already begun their plans to frame us?'

He couldn't help but rapidly come to this conclusion as he was always

aware of Ryosuke's intentions to frame him and Isomaru. After all, there was still the possibility of the mole, who had presumably ratted their operations to Ryosuke, being hidden amongst his men, waiting for the perfect chance to strike.

'But that doesn't make sense... Sugimoto still hasn't called me to confirm the success of Atsuomi's assassination. As far as I know, the ground team consisted of myself and Isomaru's aides. Ryosuke wouldn't have had enough time to kill Sugimoto before Sugimoto could contact me regarding the status of the operation.'

Which could only mean one thing in Naoe's mind. This was not Ryosuke's doing, rather, another party had made a move on himself and Isomaru. The question was who had made a move, and how did they know where Naoe and Isomaru were located?

Fsshk* *Shrrk

Violent sounds of slashing and muffled pain filled the atmosphere, snapping Naoe out of his musing. His hands moved quickly, reaching for his back pocket before subsequently powering on his flashlight in a panic to regain his bearings.

Ba-dump* *Ba-dump* *Ba-dump

His heart thumped against his chest upon seeing piles of bodies and puddles of red painting the dull grey concrete walls and floors. The looks of agony on the faces of his deceased foot soldiers made goosebumps permeate throughout the surface of his skin.

'Wha—these cuts, they were carried out so carefully. So skillfully. These are no amateurs...'

The lights powered on suddenly, leaving only Naoe and Isomaru as the individuals unharmed, for now.

Naoe's eyes quickly adjusted to the change in brightness, but his heart sank immediately upon seeing an assortment of masked men at a distance from the steel table.

Their once sleek, silver-coloured metallic masks were coated in traces of red, carved with wide smiles. Both eyes had a circular opening as

the base, but the right eye had additional features giving the mask a more ominous look. As well as a round gap, the right eye also had four sharp, thinning cutouts extending in North, South, East and West directions, giving it a starburst-like appearance. Night vision goggles were holstered at their sides, and although their blades were put away, their gloved hands looked ready to strike at a moment's notice.

Turning his head to the other side of the steel table, Naoe's eyes widened.

'What? Why aren't you defending us?'

'His' bodyguards who he had thought were on his side, were now adorning strange glasses that were slightly different from the standard dark shades that they usually wore. Their once bare hands now covered by dark gloves that were covered in fresh blood that was dripping down their blades.

Whilst Naoe was still in shock, Isomaru had begun venting his fury, not realising that they had no allies in the room drenched in red.

"What? Why aren't you killing those smiling, masked bastards?" Isomaru barked out in anger, glaring at 'his' guards to hide the trembling of his hands that exposed his fright.

The 'bodyguards' didn't bother warranting a response to Isomaru's indignant response.

Their abnormal behaviour, cold look, and strange attire sent a shiver down Naoe's spine. He quickly came to the conclusion that these men who he thought were 'his protectors' were actually operating under someone else's orders.

"Did you hear me? I sa—" Isomaru started but his voice was quickly cut off as one of the masked men, presumably the leader judging by his unique outfit, swiftly moved forward, cutting Isomaru's throat open before repeatedly stabbing his aorta, blood spilling everywhere.

Dread quickly crept under Naoe's skin as he witnessed Isomaru dying gruesomely in a bloodied mess, knowing that he would probably soon follow.

The masked man who had just killed Isomaru turned his head to Naoe, the carved wide smile exuding nothing but pure terror, causing the hair along Naoe's arm to stand on end.

Although Naoe could not see the masked man's eyes, his body could not help but react in fright instinctively. A primal fear that one feels when faced with a danger their mind can't comprehend.

Remaining grounded in his seat whilst trembling in fear on the other end of the steel table, Naoe attempted to reason with the man. His body told him that neither fight or flight was an option when face to face with this masked man.

"W-Who are you? What do you want? Money? Power? I can give you everything," Naoe stammered out in a panic upon sensing his death approaching.

Naoe couldn't think rationally, his mind was in a frenzy, desperately looking for a way to survive, hoping for mercy from the predator in front of him who had cornered him into a checkmate.

But the masked man remained silent, only tilting his head slightly in an 'innocent' way, before lowering his blade that gleamed under the industrial ceiling lights of the warehouse.

Fresh blood, once belonging to Isomaru, began dripping down from the serrated edges to form a puddle of crimson.

The tense silence and the horrific sight of Isomaru's butchered corpse made Naoe extremely uneasy. Naoe knew his death would soon follow if he didn't reach a compromise.

"Damn it! Say something will you!" Naoe exclaimed frantically, glaring in defiance to hide the fright coursing through his body, "You... you're working for someone aren't you? Is it Miyako? Kijima!?"

But the masked man remained stationary whilst standing from the other side of the steel table, staring menacingly at Naoe for a few moments before gradually walking towards where Naoe was seated.

CLICK* *CLICK* *CLICK

The sound of the man's approaching footsteps, that became louder as the distance closed, filled Naoe with anguish. How was he going to survive now? The masked man seemed to have no intention of heeding Naoe's efforts to initiate a conversation.

CLICK* *CLICK* *CLICK

The man inched closer before coming to a stop, his blade now within reach to deploy lethal cuts to Naoe.

Sensing his demise, Naoe closed his eyes tightly, waiting for his death. There was no way he could contest with this man in hand-to-hand or melee weapon combat.

But to Naoe's suprise, the sounds of slashing and searing hot pain never came. Rather words devoid of warmth escaped the masked man's mouth.

"The Greek gift. Are you familiar with its meaning?"

Naoe's eyelids shot open, revealing his grey irises that gleamed with a hint of hope seeing that the man had not killed him yet, rather had initiated a conversation.

Quickly taking deep breaths, Naoe tried to regain his composure and decipher the mysterious masked man's cryptic words.

'The Greek Gift? I assume he's referring to the Trojan Horse—a large wooden horse that the Greeks had offered to the city of Troy as a symbol of peace, hiding the treachery that lay deep. A structure hiding Greek soldiers, used to infiltrate the heavily guarded gates once it had been transported inside the city, subsequently opening the gates to allow their forces in. It was a crucial factor that led to Troy's downfall. But why is he talking about that all of a sud—'

Naoe's breathing halted momentarily, the colour quickly draining from his face as the chunks of information compiled in his head started to connect, all surrounding one pivotal moment. Only one event could equate to the cryptic words, "Greek gift", from the masked man.

'Takahashi, the executive in Atsuomi's circle... the information that

Sugimoto reported to me...'

Information about Takahashi's identity as well as his mother. A deceptively sweet fruit laced with a hidden poison served to Naoe, who had welcomed the gift with open arms, perceiving it as a tremendous advantage that would enable him to eliminate Atsuomi. Which meant that Takahashi was never on Naoe's side in the first place, or he changed allegiances at some point.

'No, the look of fear in his eyes when he saw his mother captured was not faked.'

Naoe was certain of this, which meant that Takahashi had switched sides at some point.

That would explain Sugimoto's scheduled call that never arrived because the assassination was a lost cause from the start. How far did the spider's web, that Naoe found himself caught in, extend from that pivotal moment? Naoe couldn't quite grasp any answers, his thinking disturbed by the sound of his now pounding heart. It seemed inconceivable that someone had orchestrated his downfall so meticulously.

But as his mind sharpened, he realised there was only one man who could be capable of orchestrating all these events. **That man**, whose name his instincts had warned him of.

"You... you work for Atsuomi, don't you?" Naoe whimpered, his eyes shaking in fear as they locked onto the bloodied, smiling, masked man.

The masked man gave a silent nod, before raising his blade.

"Very good, Naoe. But unfortunately for you, your time is up."

Naoe immediately froze up upon realising the masked man had no desire to continue talking, his expression morphing to one of despair. He quickly understood that the man engaging in conversation was nothing more than the act of a predator playing with its prey before delivering the killing blow.

"Wait, we ca—" Naoe spoke in a panic, but his voice was abruptly cut

off by the masked man, who delivered fatal cuts to Naoe in a similar fashion to Isomaru.

Blood splattered everywhere as Naoe's body fell to the floor with a loud thump.

The light in his eyes slowly faded with only the cold words that followed, from the masked man's mouth, to comfort him in his last moments.

"Rejoice, Naoe. Your death will be instrumental in Japan's rebirth. It's a shame you won't witness that though." His last few words sounded like pity, but the masked man had no such feelings.

At that moment, another leader, representing a major faction in the Citizens' Party, perished, the second of the day.

Fishing a cloth from his pocket, the masked man began cleaning the blade before interrupting the silence with an authoritative tone, "Has the evidence been planted?"

One of his subordinates called out from a distance, "Yes, any investigators will be led to believe that Ryosuke was behind the killings."

"Good. I still have something to take care of but that is not a concern for any of you. You are all dismissed, leave immediately by the planned transportation. The **inspector** and the National Police Agency Security Bureau will be arriving soon," the masked man, who had killed Naoe and Isomaru, announced ominously.

□□□□□□□ ✧ [M][A][C][H][I][N][A][T][I][O][N][S] ✧ □□□□□□□

Location: Tokyo

Amidst the bloodshed occurring in the nearby abandoned warehouse, a black van was parked outside containing two individuals in the backseat.

Takahashi was sitting in the backseat of the van, leaning forwards with his fingers interlocked and his foot repeatedly tapping the floor. In front of him was a man wearing dark tactical clothing, his face

cloaked by a dark balaclava that had a long slit to only expose his piercing blue eyes. But unlike Takahashi, he remained perfectly still and silent, waiting for his superior.

As Takahashi stole glances at the man wearing the balaclava, he couldn't help but think there was something about those blue irises that were familiar to him. Alas, he was unable to grasp why he felt that way.

Shhhk

The van sliding door abruptly opened, revealing another masked man but this one wasn't as sterile in appearance compared to the one already seated. A strong scent of blood entered Takahashi's nose as his eyes drifted to the bloodied mask and clothing the new appearance had.

Thunk* *Thump* *Thump

"Let's go," the man covered in red ordered upon slamming the door shut, his gloved hands clenched into fists before banging on the wall closest to the driver's seat, causing the engine to roar back to life as the vehicle began moving.

The man covered in red took a seat next to the man disguised by the balaclava, who hadn't said a word for the whole time that Takahashi had been stewing in his turbulent thoughts.

A tensile silence ensued before Takahashi's eyes subtly drifted to the masked man covered in blood, recalling their first 'introduction' and how his voice felt simultaneously familiar yet unfamiliar.

'This man, he's the same one that met me on that day...'

A memory played back in Takahashi's mind, recalling that pivotal day.

It was midnight. Takahashi was driving home from work. At the time, a couple days had passed since he had been blackmailed by Naoe and Isomaru. His mind had gradually calmed down since then but the feeling of guilt deep in his heart had not been extinguished, knowing that his mother had been kidnapped because of his own greed.

Parking his car near his apartment complex, he began walking with slow, heavy steps towards the door as the weight of his betrayal loomed on his shoulders, the fatigue of the events prior had completely drained his energy

Fishing his keys out of his pocket, Takahashi began by first unlocking the mesh door, used to prevent insects from entering the house, before moving onto the main door.

Opening the front door, he was confronted with pitch black darkness, but he instinctively felt that something was wrong. It was too quiet. Too eerie.

As he walked towards the light switch his breathing hitched momentarily as he glanced at the corner of the living room.

A man clad in dark clothing, and a sleek, silver coloured, smiling mask was illuminated by the light of the moon from the curtains that were drawn back. Panic gripped Takahashi's heart and he momentarily considered reaching for the phone in his pocket, but the cold words that emerged from the mystery man's mouth stopped him in his tracks, his voice strangely familiar yet unfamiliar at the same time.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, Takahashi Etsuo."

Takahashi's instinctively halted his movements upon hearing those ominous words. His body's involuntary production of goosebumps told him one thing—if he made any hostile movements against this man, he would die.

"W-Who are you?" Takahashi stammered out a response, his eyes glancing at the man exposed by the moonlight.

A short pause followed before the masked man, with a straight, beautiful posture, stepped closer to Takahashi and started speaking, "Who I am is of no importance. Why I'm here is what should concern you."

Takahashi immediately froze up. His cryptic response sent a shiver done Takahashi's spine. He had a lingering suspicion about why this

man was here, but prayed internally that it was not for that reason.

Swallowing a nervous gulp, Takahashi started speaking tentatively, "W-Why are you here?"

The masked man abruptly stopped his approach, "I'm the man who deals with traitors, **personally**," the man stated, his voice taking an icy tone.

'Traitor? No way... they already caught onto my betrayal?'

Takahashi's blood ran cold, realising that his betrayal of Atsuomi had already been exposed. Intrusive thoughts began leaking into Takahashi's shaken mind. Various images of the people he had seen in the past, that had been killed for backstabbing Atsuomi, began playing in his head.

His body began trembling, fearing what this man had in store for him after recalling the gruesome imagery of the fate traitors had to endure.

"Are you here to k-kill me?" Takahashi asked, indirectly admitting his guilt realising that he shouldn't lie to this man.

The man didn't respond, instead his dark, gloved hands reached out for something tucked out of Takahashi's line of sight.

Takahashi's breathing stopped momentarily as the polished, stainless-steel barrel, in the man's hand, glistened in the moonlight, a large suppressing device attached to the front of the barrel.

'A suppressed pistol? He really intends to kill me.'

Ba-dump* *Ba-dump* *Ba-dump

His heart started racing after seeing the man raise the weapon, pointing it straight at his face, fingers poised on the trigger.

Takahashi's survival instincts kicked in. Knowing that fight or flight wasn't an option, his body automatically tried a third option, attempting to reason with the predator.

"W-Wait! I had no choice! T-They kidnapped my mother! She's the only family I have left..." Takahashi cried out in terror, looking for any sliver of empathy from the man in front of him.

Interestingly, Takahashi's words halted the man's movements.

"Mother, you say? I thought you said you had no family when you received your position as head of intelligence? If sensei knew, I wonder whether you'd have kept your position," the man threatened ominously, the hints of anger in his voice caused a lump to form in Takahashi's throat.

"I l-lied, but I can still be of use! I'll do anything to keep her safe!" Takahashi exclaimed, his voice raising in a panic no longer caring if he'd be seen as pathetic, knowing that if he died here then his mother's safety would be forfeit.

"Anything?" the man probed, his finger easing off the trigger slightly.

"Y-Yes! As long as she is safe, I'll do anything! Tell me what you want me to do, and I'll do it!" Takahashi declared shakily yet with a palpable conviction seeing that he had been given a window of opportunity to compromise with the man.

The man stood in silence, seemingly pondering the desperate words that filled the silence.

"Interesting. I was going to inform sensei of your betrayal, but if you do as I say then I can grant you your mother's safety and keep it a secret from sensei," the man responded calmly, his weapon still poised on Takahashi.

Takahashi's eyes widened slightly, realising that there might still be some hope for his mother, but also the fact that Atsuomi did not know about his betrayal, yet.

The man went on to propose that Takahashi become a triple agent, feeding Naoe and Isomaru curated information to lead to their downfall, subtly manipulating them into attempting an assassination on Atsuomi. Meanwhile, the masked man's operatives would locate Natsue, Takahashi's mother.

After explaining Takahashi his role, the man began to leave his apartment but abruptly stopped at the door, his back remaining turned to Takahashi.

""Jack". That is what you will refer to me as," he calmly stated.

"'Jack"? An English name?'

It was strange to Takahashi. This man was working for Atsuomi yet didn't have a Japanese name.

'No. I'm sure it's an alias.'

But this was of no importance to Takahashi. All he cared about was doing what he was told to ensure that Natsue was safe.

Takahashi thought he could breathe a sigh of relief, but it seems Jack had other plans.

At the doorway, Jack's head suddenly turned, his once tranquil voice taking a sharp turn whilst looking over his shoulder.

"If you squander the opportunity I have given you, we will meet again. For when that day comes, do not dare to try and repent because even God won't be able to save you from me."

His words, coupled with the unnerving carved smile on the mask he was wearing, sent numerous chills down Takahashi's spine.

The memory ended there.

'I have dutifully followed every instruction this masked man, Jack, gave me.'

Takahashi understood the intentions behind each piece of information that he had given Naoe and Isomaru.

He was told to deliberately reveal the existence of the White Room and Atsuomi's son to gain Naoe's and Isomaru's trust, knowing that the information was new and would convince them that Takahashi was sincere. That the intelligence he would collect in the future was accurate. But this is not the only actions he took.

Revealing that Atsuomi and his son planned to travel across the country to meet investors and procure funding to pressure Naoe and Isomaru into taking reckless action. Manipulating them to stage Atsuomi's assassination.

Giving them inaccurate information regarding Atsuomi's security detail, leaving them unprepared for the onslaught they would face. Mentioning Atsuomi's son was also in the convoy when he wasn't.

This was some of the curated information Takahashi had been feeding them.

As a result, Naoe and Isomaru had fallen.

'And it's all because of this man, Jack...'

Just like from their first introduction, Takahashi was certain that the name "Jack" was an alias but wouldn't dare to question said man's identity lest his blood end up on said man's blade.

'If I had wasted the opportunity he gave me then I'm certain my mother and I would have died miserably.'

The dried remnants of blood splattered over the sleeves of Jack's dark tactical clothing and his once silver-coloured, smiling mask convinced Takahashi of this fact.

But Takahashi couldn't help but wonder what his relationship with Atsuomi was. To him, Jack gave the impression of someone who worked independently from Atsuomi, a lone wolf that liked to work alone, but the churning in his stomach told him that conclusion couldn't be right. Jack was a man shrouded in deception, making it hard to read his intentions.

Alas, there was one thing that Takahashi could know for certain though.

'This man is dangerous. He is an enemy I never want to make.'

...

...

...

Some time had passed. They had been driving for a while but eventually the van came to a stop.

Jack's masked face tilted towards Takahashi, "It's time. Your mother was extracted safely and is waiting outside."

Relief flooded Takahashi's heart upon hearing Jack's words. But he couldn't shake the ominous feeling he got from the words that followed.

"Shiba, today will be your final test, do not disappoint me," Jack coldly stated, staring at the man in the balaclava, before opening the sliding door to the van.

Blinding rays of the sun resting high in the sky made Takahashi instinctively shield his eyes with his hand.

Carefully stepping out of the van, his eyes gradually adjusted to the change in lighting before a run-down shack, roughly hidden amongst the long grass, entered Takahashi's now fully functioning vision.

Jack and the man named "Shiba", began moving towards the shack with Takahashi following closely behind, his heart thumping against his chest in anticipation of meeting his mother after having been separated for so long.

Opening the creaky wooden doors revealed a group of men adorning similar attire to Jack, their attention focussed on the bruised woman that was seated on the dirty floor, her long blonde hair covering her dim green eyes.

Upon seeing the familiar figure of his mother, Takahashi couldn't hold back his emotions, quickly rushing up to her with tears threatening to escape his sockets.

"Mother!"

Natsue's eyes snapped to the familiar voice, her eyes lighting up before quickly blurring with water as tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Etsu... is it really you?" Natsue called out, her frail body and voice trembling.

Takahashi dropped to his knees, clutching his dear mother in his hands, hugging her tightly as his eyes brimmed with tears.

"You're okay... did they hurt you?" Takahashi croaked, gently running his hands through her blonde hair, attempting to comfort her.

A small smile emerged on Natsue as she broke the hug momentarily before cupping Takahashi's cheeks.

"No... I'm okay Etsu-kun, I'm just glad you're safe," she whimpered, gently embracing her son again in another tight hug,

This would have been a wholesome scene but this reunion was never meant to be long lived.

Chk-chk

The sound of a gun being primed cut through the heartfelt atmosphere.

Takahashi's eyes snapped to the source, where his stomach immediately sank.

Jack had unmasked himself, revealing a man with short black hair, closed snake-like eyes and a sickeningly, calm smile.

The dots in Takahashi's head finally clicked, quickly understanding why Jack's voice sounded familiar yet unfamiliar at the same time. There was no way he would not remember that unnerving smile from the day where his world fell apart.

"You! It's you! The man who bumped into me the night before my mother was kidnapped!" Takahashi exclaimed, his voice quivering slightly as he pondered the implications.

The night Takahashi was referring to was when he went to purchase pastries for his mother, Natsue, but before returning to his car, he had bumped into a strange man coming from the opposite direction, specifically the direction of Takahashi's vehicle. It was the last time

he had dinner with Natsue before she was kidnapped by foot soldiers sent by Naoe and Isomaru.

If this man named Jack had been there on the day of the incident, then he must have been watching Takahashi closely. In other words, he had known about Natsue, Takahashi's mother, for a long time. A direct contradiction to what the elusive man, Jack, had claimed.

The puzzle pieces slowly started to make more sense as he started to fit them together. He had always wondered who had leaked his information but had put it at the back of his mind because his mother's safety came first.

'Jack. He's the one who orchestrated my mother's kidnapping by leaking my personal information to Naoe and Isomaru.'

That was the only conclusion that Takahashi could draw with the information he had.

Jack's smile widened, to the point where it made Takahashi feel sick to the stomach, before responding with a mocking voice, "Oh, so you remember me? That's good, but why is your anger directed at me; I wonder?"

"You... you bastard, don't pretend! You're the one who leaked my personal information and the reason why she was kidnapped! It was you who betrayed Ayanokōji-sensei's trust!" Takahashi barked in anger, glaring at Jack with malice whilst simultaneously shielding his mother.

Upon hearing his last words, Jack's expression turned colder, exuding a palpable malice behind the 'friendly' smile plastered on his face, "Betraying sensei? How humorous. Did you really believe the lies that I fed you? Sensei had always been aware of your mother's existence."

As that bombshell of a truth entered Takahashi's ears he froze-up, swiftly beginning to contemplate Jack's words carefully.

'No... Ayanokōji-sensei knew about her the whole time? He knew but still appointed me as head of intelligence? Why?'

But as his thoughts evolved deeper, he couldn't shake the feeling of

betrayal from his heart, realising that the man who he had respected so much had used him in the cruellest way, putting his mother in harm's way for personal gain.

It was a devastating blow to Takahashi's already dwindling morale. He had believed Atsuomi was the one who had enabled his dream to come to fruition; providing for Natsue so that she could live peacefully. But now, Takahashi realised that there was no goodwill behind Atsuomi's gestures. The man was evil to the core, at least from Takahashi's perspective.

Jack, ignoring the look of despair on Takahashi's face, turned to the man wearing the balaclava, his voice taking on a more authoritative tone.

"**Shiba, take off your mask right now.**"

Takahashi was snapped out of his somber thoughts by Jack's cold voice, as the man named Shiba reluctantly took off his balaclava to reveal a face that crushed Takahashi's already broken heart, exposing a familiar, short black, bowl-like hairstyle akin to someone who Takahashi knew well. The feeling of familiarity that Takahashi got from the man's blue eyes earlier quickly made more sense.

"**Shohei? What... you're with them?! Why? I thought you were my friend,**" Takahashi spoke with a solemn voice, his eyes trembling in pain whilst looking at the man who he once thought of as a friend.

Shohei Takamura, or rather his real identity, **Shiba Katsunori**, Takahashi's second-in-command in Atsuomi's intelligence department, stood in silence in front of Takahashi, adorning a shade of blue in his eyes that was unfamiliar to Takahashi. They had been friends in Atsuomi's intelligence department, at least, that was Takahashi's perception up to this point.

In the midst of Takahashi's spiralling turmoil, Jack walked with careful steps towards Shiba, holding out a polished weapon. His signature unnerving smile had been replaced by a neutral expression with his lips now straightened.

"**Take the gun, Shiba, and shoot them both. They are**

liabilities, no longer of any use to sensei. Prove your fealty to the Shadows of the White Room," Jack coldly stated, handing his suppressed pistol to Shiba.

A flicker of hesitation flashed through Shiba's eyes as he carefully picked up the lethal firearm. He could feel the daunting stares from the back of the room from the other Shadows, who were carefully watching him, their bodies ready to attack if he dared to make a move against their leader, Jack.

Colour quickly drained from Takahashi's face upon hearing Jack's heartless words.

"W-Wait, please spare my mother! She's innocent! She's done nothing wrong!" Takahashi cried out, desperately trying to protect his mother, who was shakily glancing at Shohei, or rather Shiba, with tears streaming down her eyes, shivering in fright.

Shiba hesitated momentarily, prompting Jack to start whispering deceit into his ears.

"Do it, Shiba. The Shadows are your future family. We have to protect our family, no matter the cost. Those two are witnesses —outsiders. You can't let them escape and harm our family."

The devilish words began pushing Shiba to the edge, his voice coming out low with a slight quiver, "I...I..."

Jack's voice took a sharp turn witnessing Shiba's indecisiveness.

"To be a Shadow means to live the life of a predator, facing all obstacles without hesitation because hesitation is a weakness. Weakness has no place among the Shadows. Make your choice, now."

"We've known each other for years! Please! Don't—"

Takahashi's voice was quickly cut off as two suppressed bullets were quickly fired, causing two bodies to slump down with a thud as blood spilled from their heads.

Shiba lowered the gun with trembling hands, his breathing unsteady

as he gazed at his hands that had snuffed out the life of innocents.

Jack approached Shiba, patting him gently on the shoulder to redirect his attention and calm his spiralling nerves.

"Good job. You've proven your loyalty to the Shadows, showing that you are capable of protecting our identities. You are one of us now," Jack said with a hint of 'warmth' in his voice, his hand offering the signature, smiling mask that the Shadows of the White Room wear.

Shiba stared at the mask in his hand with hollow eyes. Behind him the Shadows watch in silence, their oppressive presence a reminder of the new world he was now part of.

□□□□□□□ ✧ MACHINATIONS ✧ □□□□□□□

Location: Shinjuku, Tokyo

At the top of a tall building in Shinjuku, Ryosuke was pacing back and forth in his penthouse, his shoes repeatedly tapping rhythmically against the luxurious, polished marble floor, before abruptly coming to a stop near the black coffee table.

Perched on the middle of the sleek table, his phone stared at him in silence, almost mockingly.

'What's going on? It's been sometime since Hasegawa called me, informing me that the assassination was a success. But since then, he hasn't provided me with any updates.'

Ryosuke, upon receiving news of the mission's success, had told Hasegawa to carry out their operations to frame Naoe and Isomaru and had received a positive response from his right hand man. But since then, there had been no further communications.

A gnawing sense of unease quickly took root inside Ryosuke's chest, as he ran his hands through his dishevelled hair that looked more grey than usual.

Glancing at the nearby large screen, OLED TV, and then the watch on his wrist, he resolved himself to grab the remove and power the display on, hoping to find new information from the news that was scheduled to start in a few minutes.

With the flick of his wrist and the push of the button, the OLED TV awakened from its slumber, causing Ryosuke to quickly switch to the main news channel.

A beautiful female reporter appeared on the screen but here face expressed anything but delight, evident in the urgent tone of her voice.

As Ryosuke repeatedly tapped the volume button, the words that emerged from the screen made his stomach sink.

"We have some shocking news to share with our dear Japanese listeners. Earlier this morning, a large conspiracy involving the attempted assassination of a growing political figure affiliated with the Citizens' Party occurred today. Details are scarce because the National Police Agency Security Bureau are acting swiftly to arrest the key figures responsible for what could have been a national tragedy."

Hearing the grievous words from the reporter immediately

immobilised Ryosuke before he rapidly began to question the implications of the information.

'What!? Hasegawa told me that the assassination was a success! So why is the news reporting it as an attempted assassination? More importantly, the National Police Agency Security Bureau is arresting suspects?!?'

Ryosuke's mind was in disarray after receiving the bombshell from the female news reporter. Taking deep breaths, he gradually calmed his turbulent thoughts and tried to piece together what had happened.

'The assassination was foiled even after our extensive preparations which means that Atsuomi is still alive. Since Hasegawa lied to me, he must've been compromised.'

But as soon as the thought of Hasegawa having already been arrested entered his mind, his heart plummeted.

'Wait, that call I answered from Hasegawa earlier, don't tell me...'

The possibility that the line had been tapped, and Hasegawa had cut a deal with the National Police Agency Security Bureau entered Ryosuke's mind, causing his blood to run cold. Although Hasegawa was loyal to Ryosuke, everyone had a line, and Hasegawa had only pledged his allegiance to Ryosuke believing he would be capable of bringing the Peace Party prosperity. But since that was no longer possible—well, nothing else needs to be said.

Ba-dump* *Ba-dump* *Ba-dump

His heart started beating out of his chest, realising that armed forces were probably on their way to arrest him.

'Fuck! I need to get out of here quickly. They definitely have enough evidence to arrest me.'

Ryosuke got up in a panic, going to his safe to collect any leftover cash he had to plan his getaway, however...

BLAM

The supposedly secure entry to his penthouse was breached, the heavy door falling down with a massive thud. Ordered footsteps and chants soon followed as a series of armed officers cleared the rooms, eventually coming face to face with Ryosuke.

"Freeze! Get on the fucking floor, now!" The commanding officer barked, his face only exposing his sharp eyes that glared at Ryosuke with murderous intent.

The colour quickly drained from Ryosuke's face as he realised the jig was up and it was time to pay for his sins.

Handcuffs were roughly placed onto Ryosuke's hands before he was abruptly pulled upwards to his feet, an arrest warrant placed in front of his face, detailing the heinous crimes he had been accused of, such as conspiracy to kill a political official from the ruling party and the attempted murder of said politician. Ryosuke's face quickly morphed into anger and confusion upon reading some of the other charges.

'Killing of Naoe and Isomaru? What kind of bullshit is that? I didn't order anything like that!'

"These charges are bullshit!" Ryosuke shouted through his gritted teeth, his eyes narrowing onto the commanding officer.

"We'll see about that," the officer said mockingly, roughly escorting Ryosuke out of the penthouse.

Whilst Ryosuke was being escorted out, his eyes briefly met with an inspector's, the name "Hiroshi", engraved on the pin lodged into his uniform. A look of satisfaction on the man's face was clear but his eyes told a different story, reflecting nothing but unease.

With heavy steps Ryosuke was transported by the officers outside of the building, where a series of reporters were desperately trying to get a statement from him.

It was strange encounter for Ryosuke. After all, none of the suspects had been named yet but these reporters knew beforehand where to be to catch the footage.

But this was not the only surprise left for the citizens of Japan, as an

even bigger bomb was about to detonate, that would no doubt shake the foundations of Japan.

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After being arrested, Ryosuke found himself seated in a jail cell, where he had been for the last few hours, his mind frantically trying to piece together where it all went wrong.

'Why? How did this happen? What caused the assassination to be foiled?'

Ryosuke lacked intel. He didn't have sufficient information to know why the assassination had failed. The only logical conclusion was that they had been betrayed, but even so, the level of preparation the National Police Agency had was unusual. Almost like they had known about the plot long before it had been executed.

'Did Hasegawa, who lied to me, betray me long before the operation had been put in motion? Was Atsuomi informed of the attempted assassination prior to the day of the attack?'

The buzzing of the nearby TV, perched up on a wall outside his jail cell, snapped Ryosuke out of his thoughts. He quickly lifted himself up, taking quick strides before grasping the sturdy, iron bars, peeking through the gaps to get a better view of the display.

His senses sharpened as he tried to gleam more information from the female newsreader's mouth.

"Tonight, we will be sharing more details on the attempted assassination of a growing political figure of the Citizens' Party," she said with a tense voice, picking up a piece of paper lying on the nearby table.

She cleared her voice before reading out the contents on the report, "Earlier this morning, politician Ayanokōji Atsuomi was scheduled to visit a children's hospital housing underprivileged youth situated across the city, but was ambushed by armed men, who had set up a

trap at a tunnel on their scheduled route."

'What? Visit children's hospitals? What sort of bullshit is that? He was going to meet investors across the country for his own gain!'

Ryosuke was no fool. That kind and magnanimous image that Atsuomi had presented himself as to the public was a facade. However, given that public perception had been slowly shifting away from the seniority system and toward younger talent meant that Atsuomi's poularity had grown significantly.

The news reporting an entirely different narrative to what Ryosuke knew made him immediately suspicious, but for now, he held back his conjectures. Opting to continue to listen carefully for any new information.

"Luckily, the plan had been thwarted beforehand, thanks to the cooperation between the National Police Agency Security Bureau and individuals from the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department, who had warned Ayanokōji long before the attack was scheduled."

'So that's why. National Police Agency Security Bureau must have caught wind of our plans beforehand and covertly conducted their own surveillance to thwart our plans. But the question is, how did they receive detailed information regarding our plot to assassinate Atsuomi?'

"In a shocking twist, prominent members from the two main political parties of Japan were the masterminds of the assassination. Our sources tell us that Ryosuke Tanaka, lead representative for the Peace Party, Naoe Jinnosuke and Isomaru, both representing major factions of the Citizens' Party, were the perpetrators who orchestrated the assassination. Ryosuke has been apprehended, but Naoe and Isomaru were found dead once officers had arrived on scene for their arrest. Evidence collected at the scene of their deaths revealed that Ryosuke orchestrated their killings to cover up his involvement in the sinister plot."

Ryosuke felt a shiver crawl down his spine. He had considered that Naoe and Isomaru may have backstabbed him in the end and framed him, but they would end up getting burned as well if they did it so soon, especially since the assassination had been foiled.

'But if Naoe and Isomaru are dead, then who framed me?'

Following this question he had asked himself, Ryosuke quickly realised that something bigger was at play. Someone else was pulling the strings.

"Just moments ago, the National Police Agency Security Bureau released a statement, emphasising that numerous criminals from various crime syndicates were arrested at the scene by the National Police Agency Security Bureau, with the evidence recovered proving their link to Naoe, Isomaru and Ryosuke. They go on to mention that the operation wouldn't have been so decisive, successful, and fruitful at such a large scale without Ayanokōji's presence, who had voluntarily placed himself in danger to lure them out. We will receive more details over the coming days—"

The news reader abruptly pauses, a shocked expression quickly morphing on her face, before her eyes lit up with anticipation.

"Oh, we just got a call in from our ground team! After hours of waiting, they said that we have the opportunity to get an exclusive interview with Ayanokōji Atsuomi! Switching over to them now."

'What? An exclusive interview with Atsuomi? No... don't tell me...'

The screen flashed for a second before a new face appeared, a face that Ryosuke loathed.

A microphone was swiftly placed in front of a golden-eyed man adorning a sharp suit with his brown hair combed back. The reporter on the ground exchanged very quick pleasantries with the man before moving onto the serious questions that everyone watching wanted answers to.

"Ayanokōji Atsuomi, could you tell us why you put yourself in serious danger to catch the perpetrators? Was there any need for you to do this considering that you knew about the attack beforehand?" the reporter's worried voice quizzed before shifting the microphone back to Atsuomi.

Atsuomi's golden eyes snapped to the camera, exuding nothing but a

fiery confidence. He held the camera's gaze for a heartbeat before answering.

"Yes. It was absolutely necessary," Atsuomi stated firmly with a steady voice.

The reporter's expression morphed into one of intrigue, immediately probing Atsuomi for his reasoning with an arched eyebrow, "But why? Could you provide us more details?"

Atsuomi remained completely motionless with his eyes poised on the camera for a few seconds, feigning contemplation, before speaking with a measured voice, "I intended to share my thoughts to the people on another occasion, but perhaps what the Japanese people needs now more than ever, in these turbulent times, is a firm reassurance of our future, rather than silence."

The atmosphere immediately hushed as everyone waited eagerly for his next words.

"When I was first informed by a representative from the National Police Agency Security Bureau about the attack on my life, I was shaken—not just for myself, but for what it represented. It showed me that our system had dropped to a level of wickedness where it would silence anyone who dared to challenge it.

But I would not let fear dictate my actions which is why I quickly realised what I needed to do. I could not take a seat back and let the roots of corruption within our political system grow further," Atsuomi stated firmly, his words laced with double meaning.

Goosebumps permeated through Ryosuke's skin as he quickly grasped the hidden intent behind Atsuomi's words.

"I made the choice to put myself in harm's way, serving as bait to lure the leeches out. To ensure all the cogs within that black-hearted machine were put to rest. That all the wrongdoers, who were the reason behind our nation's decline, were brought to justice. But make no mistake, this is not for personal glory, but a necessary measure for our country. Going along with their scheme and facing the danger head-on was the only way to expose all the shadowy figures, carrying

treacherous intentions, under the limelight."

Atsuomi took a breath before continuing his words, the camera focussing on his facial expressions, showing the blazing fire of patriotism raging in his eyes.

"I believe that actions speak louder than words, which is why I took the bull by the horns. Other politicians like Kijima or even Prime Minister Miyako constantly talk about integrity and reform, but the Japanese people deserve a leader who can act decisively."

Gasps could be heard from people nearby the location where the interview was being conducted. Atsuomi's words were indirectly challenging Miyako's rule and calling out the 'golden boy' of the Citizens' Party for their lack of action. His bold words brought upon a new tension to the silence.

The quietness lingered for a few moments, before Atsuomi continued his speech, his piercing eyes and powerful voice laced with anger cutting through the tension.

"After careful reflection in the days leading up to the attack, I realised one truth. For too long, the Japanese political system has been held hostage by the old guard, situated in the long-standing Citizens' Party and Peace Party, who have hidden their misdeeds from the public to maintain their power. But this deceit must end. The Japanese people need—no, deserve better."

Atsuomi's back straightened before his voice took a bolder tone, rising with conviction that was palpable to everyone watching.

"That is why I will propose the beginning of a new era to the Japanese people. Hear my words, people of Japan, today marks the day of **Genesis***. The day where we are no longer shackled by the old guard. The day where we can all rise above this catastrophe stronger together."

But Atsuomi didn't stop there, he moved forward exuding immense confidence to demonstrate the depth of his creed.

"And as a testament to this historical day, I announce the formation

of a new political party: the **Genesis Party**."

Shocked expression formed on the nearby reporters and listeners who were watching the scene, but before they could ask any further questions, Atsuomi's thunderous voice full of passion for his country continued.

"Mark my words people of Japan, just like today, I will always stand at the forefront of this party—no, this country, to strive for one goal and only one goal," Atsuomi courageously stated before pausing to emphasise his upcoming words.

"**To make Japan great again**. To bring forth a new era free from the corrupt seniority system that has plunged our country into darkness."

Another pause ensued before Atsuomi ended his speech, delivering his final words with an unwavering conviction.

"I implore the people of Japan to make their choice. If you follow me, I will lead us to our salvation even if I must stand at death's door.

Heed my words because this country will rise to a future where justice reigns supreme, where merit triumphs over privilege, and where we all as fellow Japanese citizens can hold our heads high, proud of the new era we will ushers ourselves into.

This is not a promise; it is an unbreakable vow.

So, I ask you, the people, will you stand with me? Will you rise with me to reclaim the spirit of Japan? Together we can forge a legacy that will never be forgotten, marking the moment we dared to dream, dared to hope and dared to believe.

The time has come for Genesis."

Even though Atsuomi was shamelessly taking the opportunity to propose a new political party amidst the unstable times, the Japanese people watching couldn't help but feel their hearts being moved. The man in front of their eyes had made his ambition clear to them, differing from other politicians who feed them sweet lies all for the sake of power.

If it was anyone else attempting to create a new political party at this very moment, then they would likely have been labelled as opportunistic and disingenuous. But up until this point, Atsuomi had established himself as someone who cares for the youth. He had donated a large amount of funds to children's hospitals and showed support for underprivileged children. Not only that, but the official story given by the mainstream media was he had secretly planned to visit other children's hospitals to continue his support of the youth, but that plan had been jeopardised because the old guard was trying to kill him. That alone was an unforgivable act that would make anyone angry.

Therefore, it was perfectly reasonable for Atsuomi to be furious with the long-standing seniority system and disappointed in the Citizens' Party, subsequently taking it upon himself to create a new political party to break free of the shackles of the old guard, all for the sake of Japan.

That is why, from the perspective of the Japanese citizens, they saw Atsuomi as an icon. A hero. A man who was willing to risk his own life for the betterment of the country, something he had demonstrated through his actions, willingly putting himself in danger of being assassinated despite knowing about the plot beforehand. A feat which Prime Minister Miyako, and even Senator Kijima, could not match.

The statement made by the National Police Agency Security Bureau added a great degree of credibility to his claims, since they stated that the large-scale success of the operation would not have been possible without Atsuomi bravely being the bait to lure out the dark forces.

Thus, he had shown them through actions rather than words, which is why they couldn't stop their hearts from drumming against their chest, feeling as if he was the leader Japan needed. That they could trust him as their ruler to bring real change to the country. He had proven as much by being putting himself in the crosshairs, resulting in the collapse of various crime syndicates, who had ties to the arrested masterminds behind the conspiracy: Naoe, Isomaru, and Ryosuke.

A lot of these criminals from these organised crime groups had caused many families in Japan a lot of pain. In the past justice had not been dished out to these men due to many people in positions of power looking the other way. However, Atsuomi's heroism had overturned this model, ensuring that justice had been served.

Conversely, the Citizens' Party's reputation was in tatters given that Naoe and Isomaru, leaders of two prominent factions in the political party, had been involved in a scandal that had shook Japan's foundations. The Japanese citizens would have already started to lose faith in Prime Minister Miyako, who had given such devilish people positions of power. Senator Kijima's influence would also decrease as people would lose faith in the ruling Citizens' Party that he is part of. With enough '**guidance**', the people would soon resent Miyako and Kijima, who had done nothing and ultimately failed to remove such corruption, no matter how unreasonable it may seem.

The Peace Party would undoubtedly collapse. Their lead candidate, Ryosuke Tanaka, who was said to be representing the party in the next election, had been a key player in the scandal. Coupling this with the fact that the Peace Party had been involved in misconduct in the past, their downfall was inevitable following Genesis.

In short, the day of Genesis would go down in history for being known as the instant where Ayanokōji Atsuomi had amassed power to move the whole country, bringing fourth the dawn of a new era in Japan's history. But also, the moment in which the starlike record of the Citizens' Party had been dragged through the mud, and the beginning of the Peace Party's collapse.

With the people of Japan losing trust in the two major political parties of Japan's political system, they will need someone to trust in such an unsettling time, leaving the perfect opportunity for the new Genesis Party to take the reins, with the nation's 'hero', Atsuomi, leading the charge. With enough media coverage, the Genesis Party would rise in prominence at an exponential rate.

The added narrative that Atsuomi had been visiting children's hospitals but was stopped by the wicked members of the old guard would fan fierce fires within the hearts of the Japanese people. They would never forgive them for their evil deeds, making it

excruciatingly difficult for the Citizens' Party to ever make a comeback.

Even if that wasn't the case, there were always **other measures** that could be taken to accelerate the Citizens' Party's decline with the tide now turned against them.

Ryosuke's body trembled in fear, the scattered pieces in his mind slowly fitting together as he asked himself the critical question: Who benefited the most from this fiasco that had been exposed to the public? There was only one man who did.

'Atsuomi. He... he must've orchestrated this somehow. I don't know how, but the outcome is too favourable. It's too convenient to just be a coincidence.'

Only Ryosuke could come to this conclusion because he was one of the involved parties, but anyone who heard the curated information they had been fed by the media, would not be able to see this conclusion. After all, Atsuomi had become a heroic symbol within the country who represented the father of a new era in Japan's history. Questioning or accusing him as the mastermind would be inconceivable with the information available.

Ryosuke couldn't stop his body from shaking in terror. Atsuomi was an opponent he couldn't hope to beat, his schemes were too powerful. Not only did Atsuomi the orchestrate downfall of the two major political parties in Japan, but he also successfully bolstered himself as the hero of the nation, engraving his newly founded Genesis Party in the hearts of the Japanese citizens.

But little did Ryosuke know that this was only the beginning of Atsuomi's machinations.

****

A/N:

Genesis*: According to Cambridge Dictionary, Genesis is defined as *"the origin of something, when it is begun or starts to exist."*

On another note, if you're interested in the realism of the

scenario depicted in this chapter, then here is some extra information where something with similar themes occurred in the past.

In history, there have been cases where two major political parties lose favour with the people, enabling a third political party to rise.

An example is The Whig Party and Democratic Party in the United States during the 1850s.

The Whig Party became increasingly divided over issues related to slavery. This is because the Northern and Southern factions could not reconcile their differences, eventually leading to their decline and collapse in 1854 [1,3].

The Democratic Party also split over the issues of slavery, inducing factionalism between the Northern and Southern democrats who had different ideologies, but still kept power despite the internal division [2].

As a result, a new Republican Party was formed, uniting anti-slavery factions from the former Whig Party in the North and won the presidential election in 1860 against the internally divided Democratic Party, with Abraham Lincoln as the candidate representative for the Republican Party, i.e., 16th U.S. President [3].

Sources:

[1] https://www.history.com/news/whig-party-collapse

[2] https://www.senate.gov/about/origins-foundations/parties-leadership/overview.htm#:~:text=The%20Democratic%20Party%20also%20split,Senate%20in%20support%20of%20secession.

[3] https://voteview.com/parties/200

I hope you enjoyed the chapter!

V0 - Chapter 8: Growth

Location: Outside Tokyo

It was nearly midday.

A couple days had passed. Honami had managed to get over her earlier embarrassment from that particular night.

Given her young age, she wasn't sure of the true reason as to why she whimsically decided to give Kiyotaka a peck on the cheek that night. But that didn't matter now, especially since she had found out some distressing news the previous day.

'He's going to be leaving soon...'

After taking Kiyotaka's advice to heart, she had resolved herself to help her mother, Chisato, as much as possible. Doing anything she could to alleviate the stress that she must be feeling. Whether that be helping with cleaning, cooking, or just spending more time with her mother, Honami wanted to show Chisato that she could depend on her for support. Although Honami knew that there wasn't much she could do as a child to console her mother's hidden sorrow or adult problems, she would do her best to instill some hope.

But in the process of providing her utmost assistance, Honami had overheard a conversation, the previous evening, between Kiyotaka and one of the suited men who were stationed outside the house.

"Kiyotaka, you will be departing from this villa in two days' time, early in the morning," the man said stoically.

"Understood," Kiyotaka responded with an upright posture and voice devoid of emotion, suggesting that he wasn't bothered by the development, before moving back towards the stairs to his room.

As Honami recalled the memory, she started pouting with a hint of annoyance but also an underlying sadness.

'That baka! He's still acting like a robot!'

It wasn't the fact that his expression didn't change that bothered Honami, rather that he didn't tell her or her family that he would be leaving them. Was he really planning to leave without saying goodbye? The thought saddened her, but she was smart enough to understand that the boy was dense in the head when it came to social interactions, so his actions weren't completely unexpected.

Honami wouldn't hold a grudge against the boy because he couldn't express himself, especially considering that he had told her he had been homeschooled his whole life. Although Kiyotaka didn't say it directly, she suspected that he had little or no interaction with kids his age considering his alien behaviour. Despite that, she still felt hurt that he hadn't informed her or Yukari that he would be leaving the villa soon.

True, she knew he had consistently acted aloof during their stay at the villa and had no obligation to tell them, but perhaps, deep in her heart, she hoped that they had got closer after everything they had been through; that he too thought they were friends and was comfortable enough to confide to her.

That's why, for the first time since their stay at the villa, Honami was annoyed with Kiyotaka. It wasn't a feeling born of malice though, rather one from understanding yet also frustration; something complex.

There was no doubt that she was grateful to him and wanted to repay the young boy's kindness. After all, he had done so much for her, but what had she done for him? She felt greatly indebted to him.

But at the same time, she wanted to be selfish, spending as much time with him as possible before his departure. This was out of character for the normally kindhearted and understanding personality that Honami was known for: putting others' needs before her own.

However, among other new sentiments, it seems like the young boy's presence brought out the cheekier side of her from when she was younger.

Which is why Honami was heading to her sister's room to collect 'reinforcements' to confront the young boy, aiming to 'steal' some of the limited time he had remaining.

'He won't be able to escape now!'

Meanwhile, seated at his desk in his room, Kiyotaka was busy finishing off the reading material his father had provided him. But his mind was elsewhere.

'Yukari and Honami...'

Kiyotaka figured it would be best if he left without a word, not bothering to tell Honami or Yukari about his soon to come departure. One reason being that he was already aware that Honami was eavesdropping, so he didn't see any point informing them, assuming that she would naturally tell her sister of the news.

But the other reason was related to his 'rebirth' upon being exposed to the new world. Although he acknowledged the world was vast with lots of opportunities to obtain new knowledge, becoming complacent as a result was unacceptable. That was a philosophy conditioned by the White Room. After all, Kiyotaka, being the target of his 'fellow' fourth generation subjects' wrath, had learned at a very age that only death awaited the careless.

Which is why, before arriving, he had told himself that there was no merit in getting attached to this world, after all, he would return to the White Room after the trip concluded. Dwelling on the possibilities in the wider world would distract him from absorbing more teachings from the White Room after he returned.

With that logic in mind, there was no reason to notify Honami's family of his departure, rejecting any possible emotional connections.

'But why do I feel an inkling of uncertainty with my decision?'

Perhaps the flicker of warmth that the boy had felt the other night

had left a lingering sense of doubt in his decision to leave quietly.

But the White Room wasn't a place where relationships had any benefits, if anything, they were a burden in such an environment.

Therefore, even if a small voice deep down in his heart drew shadows of hesitation over his choice, they had to be pushed back; vanquished. All for the purpose of protecting himself.

'Regardless, Honami should already be aware of my plans to leave. She was eavesdropping, after all.'

BLAM

The door suddenly burst open, as two pinkettes sprinted towards Kiyotaka, each grabbing one of his arms, hugging it closely to their chests. Kiyotaka could've easily evaded but didn't bother. He had been around both of them long enough to know that they meant no harm, and for some strange reason, they liked to tease him at any given moment.

'Huh, they look annoyed with me. Well, it's not an unreasonable reaction, given the context.'

They remained silent, just staring at Kiyotaka with their 'fierce' expressions, trying to intimidate the young boy but failing miserably.

For reasons Kiyotaka didn't know himself, he decided to play dumb.

"What's wrong?" Kiyotaka asked bluntly, trying to feign innocence despite his voice being monotone.

""What's wrong?" He dares to ask something so shameless!"

Honami mimicked his flat voice, ending her exclamation with a huff before glancing at Yukari, speaking with a playful tone. "Such an insensitive robot, isn't he, Yukari?"

"Yeah! Robotkōji is being very mean!" Yukari cried out, repeatedly nodding her head to Honami's words whilst tugging on his arm.

Kiyotaka let out a sigh at the new nickname he had acquired before

deciding to cut to the chase.

"This is about me leaving, isn't it?"

"Mhm! We're really upset you didn't tell us! Isn't that right Yukari?" Honami asked with a frown on her face.

Yukari continued nodding, mirroring her elder sister's expression.

Kiyotaka tilted his head quizzically before biting back.

"Weren't you already aware that I would be leaving, Honami? You were eavesdropping, were you not?"

His sharp voice and factual words cut through Honami's façade momentarily, but she wouldn't give up her act yet.

"Hmph, so what? We're friends, right? You should have told us yourself!"

Honami huffed indignantly, her face morphing into an 'angry' pout, simultaneously puffing up her cheeks. Yukari copied her actions.

Meanwhile, Kiyotaka considered his response carefully. Over time he had been slowly grasping the concepts of conversation. "Teasing" was one component he had observed whilst interacting with Honami and Yukari.

Kiyotaka decided to put it to the test, deliberately being misleading with his words to elicit a volatile reaction from Honami.

"Do friends kiss each other?" Kiyotaka deadpanned as if the implications of his question were insignificant.

His words made Honami's movements lock-up, her mouth opening and closing like a fish that had emerged from water. A crimson blush as red as an apple flashed on her cheeks, radiating immense heat as she started recalling the memory from the other night, abruptly causing her brain to short-circuit.

She vividly remembered the impulsive decision she made, how her lips felt against his cheek. The worse part was that she was wearing

her pyjamas the whole time beforehand.

'Eeeek! Why did I do that?! But more importantly, why did he say it like that!?'

Her brain scrambled to try and diffuse the repercussions of his question before her younger sister began relentlessly teasing her. Honami had noticed that Yukari had become progressively bolder over their stay at the villa, and was worried that she might eat up the bait Kiyotaka had so graciously provided.

But the response she gave just made the situation worse for herself.

"W-What? T-That's not—why are you bringing t-that up now?!?" Honami sputtered, the pitch of her voice skyrocketing with each stumble in her sentence.

Confusion clouded Yukari's eyes whilst gazing at her older sister's flustered expression before glancing at Kiyotaka with an inquisitive look, "Why'd you ask that Kiyo-kun?"

Kiyotaka's gazed locked onto Yukari's, before stating with his signature flat voice, "She kissed me a few days ago."

Yukari's ears perked up at Kiyotaka's comment, shifting her focus to Honami before narrowing her blue eyes. "Wait, wait, is this really true? Nami, you kissed Kiyo-kun?"

Honami comically hid her face behind the palms of her hands, crying out in embarrassment.

"N-No! I m-mean, yes!" Honami squeaked out; her voice muffled by her fingers. "But o-on the cheeks! It was a friendly k-kiss on the cheek!"

She desperately tried to hide the scorching blush on her face but at this point, even her ears had started burning up.

'Ahh! Look what he's started now! Wait... did he do this on purpose?!?'

Peeking from her fingers, Honami threw a 'fierce' glare at Kiyotaka but was only met with his never changing expressionless face.

However, for a split second, she could have sworn there was a small trace of mischief embedded in his normally tranquil eyes.

'He did it on purpose! He's enjoying this!'

"B-baka, why did you decide to leave out d-details!?" Honami said indignantly, before picking up a nearby pillow from Kiyotaka's bed, starting to repeatedly swat his head.

But it was too late. A large, dramatic gasp subsequently left Yukari's lips, as she started giggling mischievously. Since she was comfortable around Kiyotaka, she had no qualms about being brazen in his presence.

"But why did you kiss him on the cheek, Nami? Hmmm~ Oh! I know! Nami, do you maybe like *like* Kiyo-kun?" Yukari teased whilst bouncing on her toes, her eyes brimming with trouble.

"I DON'T!" Honami exclaimed, hiding her flustered expression by placing the pillow, that she was swatting Kiyotaka with, in front of her face, revealing only her shaky blue eyes.

She attempted to compose herself but ultimately failed with her stammering out an entirely unconvincing explanation.

"I-I was just t-thanking him, okay!? 'C-Cause we're f-friends!" She continued in a panic, her words slightly muffled by the pillow.

Tilting her head in feigned confusion, Yukari proceeded to egg her on, enjoying the embarrassed, yet endearing gestures of her usually calm older sister. "Are you sureee~? But why are you so red then, Nami? You're like a tomato!"

"YUKARI!" Honami screamed, attempting to stop Yukari's antics by throwing the pillow at her.

Yukari subsequently dodged, sticking her tongue out in provocation before a devious idea popped up in her head.

"Oh~? If you're so sure, then maybe I should kiss Kiyo-kun as well!" Yukari chirped, innocently tilting her head slightly to the left with her index finger touching her lips.

Before Honami could respond to the provocative statement, Yukari continued speaking, her blue eyes gleaming with playfulness in Honami's direction. "On the cheek, of course. That's what *friends* do, right, Nami?"

Honami's eyes comically widened in horror upon digesting Yukari's words.

'This girl! W-Why would she say that?!?'

Despite Yukari being younger than Honami, it seemed that she was more aware of certain things than she lets on. Honami had never been teased about boys in the past by Yukari, but perhaps she had caught onto Honami's growing affection for Kiyotaka before even Honami was aware of it herself.

Meanwhile, Kiyotaka had been observing the two carefully, noticing that Yukari's mischievousness had reached an all-time high. He couldn't help but compare how differently this girl was acting compared to their introduction a little over a week ago. Yukari was so shy and nervous when she arrived at the villa, but now, after time had passed, that abrasiveness was completely gone. The contrast in behavior was like day and night.

The truth was that when it came to teasing her elder sister, Yukari became quite proficient with her use of words. A troublesome attribute that Honami had come to learn the hard way, given that Yukari had only began becoming more confident and less shy since the they had arrived at the villa, likely due to Kiyotaka's influence.

"Y-Yukari! D-Don't say things like that!" Honami exclaimed, grabbing another pillow from Kiyotaka's bed, getting ready to hurl it at Yukari, but stopped after seeing that Yukari had already ducked behind Kiyotaka.

Peeping out from Kiyotaka's shoulder, Yukari's let out another burst of giggles before continuing to poke fun at Honami.

"What's wrong, Nami? Are you a maybe a little *jelly*?" Yukari teased before resuming her taunting words. "It's just a little peck on the cheek. You said it wasn't a big deal, right~?"

"N-No, I didn't mean—ugh!" Honami groaned, burying her face into the pillow in her hand, cutting offer her speech.

But Yukari was ruthless. She didn't stop, immediately renewing her assault whilst using Kiyotaka as a shield.

"Hehe~ you're really fired up, Nami! Maybe you're beyond just liking Kiyo-kun~! Are you already thinking about *marriage*?"

"M-MARRIAGE!?" Honami's squealed whilst dropping the pillow, her voice reaching an all-time high before raising her empty hands to point at Yukari. "You! Stop saying s-strange things!"

A twisted smile surfaced on Yukari's face as she took a different approach, chanting words that heightened the blush on Honami's face.

"Nami and Kiyo, sitting in a tree, K~I~S~S~I~N~G!"

Kiyotaka still hadn't showed any visible reaction, just casually watching the chaos ensue. However, the girl to his left was a different story.

Honami immediately pounced on Yukari, pinning her to Kiyotaka's bed before shoving her hand over Yukari's mouth. She had heard the nursery rhyme before at school, and knew just how embarrassing it was, especially the words that would follow if she didn't stop Yukari.

"S-Stop! We're supposed to be on the same side!" Honami whispered into her ears.

Yukari's let out a series of euphoric giggles that were muffled by Honami's hands before attempting to continue her taunts.

The room was quickly filled with laughter as Honami began relentlessly tickling her younger sister, a fitting punishment for her betrayal, at least in Honami's eyes.

Kiyotaka, still seated at his desk, watched the scene for a few moments longer before continuing to read his book again.

Seeing that Kiyotaka was ignoring their antics, the two sisters began

pouting after they had finished reconciling their earlier 'conflict'.

They knew they were intruding on his personal space selfishly, but their childish selves couldn't help but want to spend more time with the boy, desiring his attention, especially since he would be leaving so soon.

Getting off the bed with guilty movements, Honami picked up the pillow she threw earlier and placed it back on Kiyotaka's bed after dusting it off. She and her sister proceeded to slowly approach Kiyotaka, who was still seated at his desk, lowering their heads in shame whilst fidgeting. The earlier lighthearted atmosphere between the siblings was no longer present, rather the mood had become more somber.

"We're sorry for intruding into your room and disturbing you, Kiyotaka. We just wanted to spend more time together, before... before you leave us."

Honami's voice came out softly but there was an unmistakable sadness that lingered in her words. She hoped that Kiyotaka didn't find their actions too troublesome.

Kiyotaka glanced away from his book, looking at the two sisters' expressions that were downcast.

Over the weeks, he had gradually improved his communication skills, slowly learning the social dynamics between human beings, in particular, children his age. Of course, there was still a lot of room for growth.

'The rational choice, based on the White Room's teachings, would be to bluntly tell them there was no point in getting attached to me. There is no guarantee that we will ever meet again.'

That was what he told himself. After all, the White Room had conditioned his mind to remove the shackles for which emotional connections would bind him with.

Yet, something possessed him to act differently.

Honami's family had offered a contrasting environment that

significantly differed from the usual cold, calculating and sterile atmosphere that the White Room exuded.

Perhaps, the warm atmosphere Honami's family brought, during his stay at the villa, had impacted him more than he had let on, influencing him to act out of character.

"Okay, what would you two like to do?" Kiyotaka bluntly asked with a flat voice, exiting his seated and moving his hands in a particular way, surprising the two pinkettes whose eyes widened and mouths opened in an "O" shape.

Despite hearing his emotionless voice, their faces quickly morphed to joyful expressions as two blissful smiles surfaced on the siblings' faces.

But it wasn't his words that had drawn out such a reaction from the sisters, rather it was his actions.

Kiyotaka had comforted the sisters, standing from his seat to gently patting their pink domes for a few seconds; an act of affection that the two had previously experienced from their father, which had now unexpectantly came from the expressionless boy.

Once again, a red hue emerged on Honami's cheeks. She didn't know why, but she didn't want Kiyotaka to stop patting her head.

But that feeling was short-lived, as Kiyotaka stopped his movements, eliciting a small pout from Honami that she quickly covered up when an idea popped up in her head.

"Hehe, well, how about another board game? There is one we haven't tried yet..." Honami indirectly proposed, her gaze shifting to the chess board in the corner of Kiyotaka's room.

A plan had clearly formed in her mind. She had played a few games with her father in the past. Even though she always lost, she had played enough to understand how the pieces moved and had a good understanding of basic moves and tactics.

She believed her father to be a very good chess player, so, naturally she thought that with his teachings she could win against Kiyotaka.

'Maybe if I beat Kiyotaka, I can change that blank expression on his face!'

At that instant Yukari's and Honami's eyes met, small playful smirks emerging on the siblings' faces, indicating that they had similar ideas.

Kiyotaka upon hearing their idea and witnessing their reaction, let out a deep sigh, walking towards the corner of the room to pick up the game. "As you wish."

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Honami and Yukari once again found themselves pouting. Kiyotaka had showed no mercy and utterly crushed them every time they played.

"Hmph, no fair! How are you so good?!? You need a handicap!" Honami protested with puffed up cheeks, crossing her arms whilst playfully frowning at Kiyotaka.

"Yeah! Kiyo-kun is being a meanie!" Yukari concurred before her pout morphed into a cheeky expression as an idea quickly popped up in her head, causing her to 'steathily' move towards Kiyotaka's backside.

Whilst Kiyotaka was setting up the board for another game, he sensed Yukari sneaking behind him but didn't bother to make any move, deciding to play along with her antics. He more or less grasped what she was thinking.

Darkness quickly clouded his vision.

"Ha! You can't see now! Let's see if you can still win so easily," Yukari said, her voice smug as she covered his eyes with the palms her hands.

Honami let out a few giggles before a playful expression emerged on her face. "Mhm, but don't worry, we'll call out our moves and you will call out your moves, that should keep it fair, right Kiyotaka~?"

Kiyotaka didn't verbally respond, electing to nod in 'resignation'.

The two siblings assumed that this would be enough to defeat Kiyotaka at chess. There was no way he could keep track of every move made and picture it with just his mind, right? He was bound to make a mistake at some point, right?

But they would soon find out that their efforts were for naught.

"W-What? How did you know!"

"But... but I was being so discreet with my moves!"

"You... you!"

Various complaints emerged from the sisters' mouthes. They were convinced that temporarily blinding him would be enough to win, but he still managed to defeat them without breaking a sweat.

Kiyotaka let out another sigh but beneath that sentiment he felt something foreign.

'I wonder if this is the concept of 'fun' that those books talked about.'

He found himself pondering this development before realising that he wouldn't mind experiencing it again. It offered him a different sense of peace that couldn't be found in the White Room.

"How about we try a different game?" Kiyotaka proposed without thinking, attempting to cheer them up, an action even he didn't know why he did.

In a split second their knotted expressions were replaced by bright smiles and giggles.

The day continued as they played various different board games, filling the atmosphere with the joyous laughter of the two young girls who tried to beat him at various games.

But their fun would be cut short as the time of his departure loomed closer.

Location: Outside Tokyo

It was early morning.

A luxury black sedan rolled up the gravel driveway, the crunching sounds disturbing the once peaceful atmosphere exuded by the villa. Parking near the front door, an assortment of expressionless men exited the car, retrieving any materials that had been put in Kiyotaka's room prior to his arrival.

Amongst the escorts watching from a distance, one of the suited men approached Kiyotaka, dark shades shielding his eyes from the daunting rays of the rising sun, his once polished shoes slightly dusty from the gravel residue that dispersed with every step he took.

"Let's go. Your father is waiting on your arrival. It would be best if you didn't keep him waiting."

There was no warmth in the man's voice, just an order laced with undeniable authority but also a silent threat that made the atmosphere suddenly more suffocating.

Honami, who was watching from the door, winced slightly. As she spent more time with Kiyotaka, she had come to learn that he probably came from a wealthy family. The presence of the suited men, who she assumed to be bodyguards, and the luxury car to pick him up, convinced her of that thought.

Based on their brief 'conversation', it was clear that these men were here to escort Kiyotaka to his father. Therefore, Kiyotaka was the son of the client and which meant he should be tended to with respect and care, especially since he was only a child, at least that was Honami's perception.

'If that's the case, shouldn't they treat him a bit more gently?'

On the surface, there wasn't anything inherently wrong with the words said by the suited man. But Honami had noticed that several of the other 'bodyguards' behind had tensed up, seemingly very alert, with their hands subtly reaching for something hidden in their suits.

They looked ready to take a combat stance at a moment's notice. Of course, that would fit with the narrative of them being Kiyotaka's bodyguards, but there were contradictions in that assertion.

Normally, bodyguards would stick close to the VIP, but in this case, they maintained an abnormal distance from Kiyotaka; it was strange behaviour if your task was to protect someone.

Their actions resembled moving a dangerous prisoner rather than escorting a client.

Furthermore, their attention had heightened, and bodies stiffened only when the man had spoken to Kiyotaka, suggesting they were wary of the young boy's response and subsequent actions.

Honami who was observing closely, didn't grasp all of the hidden meanings but witnessed enough to deduce that their actions felt strange.

She would have kept pondering the issue, but those thoughts immediately vanished after hearing Kiyotaka's voice.

"Understood," Kiyotaka responded robotically, proceeding to walk towards the car without hesitation.

Honami's heart sank, a small frown quickly colouring her expression.

'Is this really how he's saying goodbye?'

Although they, including Yukari, had spent a lot of time together the previous day and were aware that Kiyotaka would be departing the following morning, she hadn't truly acknowledged the implications of him leaving.

'No... this can't be how we part ways. I still have something to give him.'

Honami glanced at Yukari and could see that Yukari felt the same as she did.

"Kiyotaka!"

"Kiyo-kun!"

Upon hearing his name, the young boy's eyes snapped to the source of disturbance.

The two young girls' light pink hair bounced in the air as they ran towards Kiyotaka, stopping within arm's reach of the young boy.

Honami nervously fished out something she and Yukari had made for Kiyotaka. Her heart started thumping against her chest as she mustered the courage to outstretch her open palm towards Kiyotaka.

"I-It's a bracelet we made for you. I-I know it might not be your style, and you don't have to wear it if you're uncomfortable, b-but Yukari and I thought you might like something to remember us by and, um, remind you that you're not alone," Honami stuttered with rapidly warming cheeks.

Kiyotaka glanced down at her hand. Resting on her palm were two identical braided bracelets, one made of ocean blue thread and the other a honey gold thread, each containing a singular stone bead. There were few inconsistencies but overall, Kiyotaka could tell they had been crafted with a lot of effort.

Yukari grabbed the honey gold one, holding it up to Kiyotaka excitedly. "This one will be ours! It's the same as yours but in a different colour! See? So, no matter where you go, we'll always be connected!"

A small pause ensued with Kiyotaka staring at the bracelets with an unreadable expression before reaching out to grab the blue one.

"Thank you," Kiyotaka said stoically, drawing out a shy smile from Honami and a beaming expression on Yukari's face.

But Kiyotaka knew that this bracelet, a symbol of their friendship and the first gift he had ever received throughout his entire life, would not last long. After completing the trip to meet the investors, as soon as he returned to the White Room, it would be taken from him.

'There is no guarantee we will meet again, so there is no need to inform them of such.'

If they weren't going to meet again then they would never know what

happened to the bracelet, thus, there was no need to advise them of his circumstances. That was what Kiyotaka thought at that moment.

Yet despite that fact, what compelled him to explain the situation to them? Why did he take an inefficient route rather than the efficient path of concealing the truth? Kiyotaka didn't know.

"Unfortunately, this won't last," Kiyotaka warned, his voice imbued with a rare sense of gravity.

Honami eyes snapped to Kiyotaka, startled by his statement, "Why?" She asked, her wide eyes searching Kiyotaka's golden ones.

"The place I'm going, they'll confiscate it. Personal items are forbidden," Kiyotaka explained vaguely.

"It's yours though... Can't you hide it someplace safe?" Honami asked softly, lowering her head solemnly whilst fiddling with her fingers.

"No, the risk is too great. They'll remove it once they find it," Kiyotaka asserted, subtly shaking his head to emphasise that her request would be impossible.

Yukari's expression dimmed after digesting the contents of their conversation, swiftly tightening her hold on the gold coloured bracelet. "B-But it's supposed to connect us! What if you... What if you forget us?"

Yukari lowered her gaze whilst uttering words charged with a palpable sadness, taking an appearance similar to her elder sister.

Both Honami and Yukari had no doubt that meeting Kiyotaka had impacted their lives positively. But could the same be said for Kiyotaka? Did he also find their time together fruitful? Or was it troublesome for him? Were they just trivial people he would soon forget? They could not know due to his never changing expression.

"I won't forget. Even without it, I will **always** remember."

Yet, those words spoken, as if they were absolute, made their eyes snap to Kiyotaka, gleaming with a sense of hope when faced with his golden irises that exuded nothing but conviction.

It felt like a silent yet firm reassurance to them. That he too, enjoyed their time together and would never forget the memories they had made.

Honami didn't know why, but his words gave her courage, driving her to do something impulsive, making the young boy's eyes widen momentarily at her rapid approach.

"Then...Then keep it with you. Even if it's only for a little while," Honami whispered softly after having wrapped her arms gently around the young boy, her heart rapidly beating faster.

Before Kiyotaka could respond, Yukari quickly copied Honami's actions, clutching onto Kiyotaka in a similar fashion to Honami but with a tighter grip.

The three stood, tangled in a small warm circle.

Kiyotaka, getting over his split second of surprise, eventually broke the silence. "Okay. I'll keep it as long as I can," he said calmly, tucking the bracelet into his pocket.

Warm smiles emerged on the girls' faces before they buried their faces deeper into Kiyotaka's shirt.

But as the hug lingered, the realisation that this might be the last time they see the young boy quickly sunk in, causing tears, they had been holding back, to break loose from their eyes.

"W-We'll miss you... a lot," Honami said, her voice cracking through sobs, the memories collected throughout their journey replayed in her mind as she clasped onto Kiyotaka harder. In the short time that they had been acquainted with one another, she had grown particularly attached to the young boy.

"Y-Yeah," Yukari agreed, any further words could not come from under the weight of anguish that pressured her heart. She would never forget how Kiyotaka had saved her life or all the times he had helped her, especially with her homework. Unlike other children who had cast her aside or teachers who gave up on her, he had never looked at her that way.

But Honami and Yukari weren't the only ones who were moved by the scene.

Chisato, who was watching the scene from the doorway of the villa, decided to join in, approaching with careful steps before crouching down to wrap all of them in a large group hug.

She too, was sad to see the young boy departing from the villa. During their stay she had seen that her daughters had become livelier, and she was certain it was because of his presence. Not only that, but the fact that he had saved Yukari from imminent danger during the encounter with the wild beast made her endlessly grateful to Kiyotaka. To Chisato, Kiyotaka felt like the son she never had and considered him to already be part of their family, even if he wasn't related by blood.

A warm smile emerged on Chisato's face, attempting to brighten the mood. "Thank you, Kiyotaka-kun. Words are not enough to emphasise how grateful I am—no, **we** are to you. Your presence has brought a new light to our family," Chisato said, her words were full of motherly affection whilst embracing all of them before closing her eyes in fulfillment.

Having calmed down slightly, Honami pitched in with crimson cheeks and a trembling voice, "We won't ever forget you," she murmured before continuing. "Even if you're far away, you always will be in our hearts."

Although Kiyotaka hadn't made any efforts to reciprocate their gestures and his expression hadn't changed on the surface, the same could not be said for his thoughts.

At that instant, Honami, Yukari, and Chisato couldn't know the depth of impact their words and gestures had had on the young boy.

Despite this being the first time the boy had ever been embraced by another human throughout his whole life, initially, he figured there wouldn't be anything special with the gesture.

But as the hug lingered and he fully absorbed the contents of their words, he quickly found himself concluding that perception was

incorrect.

'This feeling...'

It wasn't just the heat from the transfer of thermal energy between connected bodies, but something else. Something that transcended physics and his understanding of thermodynamics; an inferno that emerged from the inside, a mellowness born from human connection, fueled by shared experiences and emotions.

He had always made efforts to reject these sentiments because it was a weakness in the White Room. Shackles that would inevitably drag one into the abyss.

So why, despite all the defensive mechanisms carried out by his mind to negate the feelings, did his body long for such warmth? Why did he feel immense contentment in this moment?

At a very young age the boy had been ostracised by his peers. Nearly all of them baring their fangs at him in animosity, ready to take his life at a moment's notice the instant he grew careless.

The instructors were no different. Purposefully fueling their hatred for him, trying to break him like they had broken the others.

He knew no one would come to save him. That he could only trust his own abilities to protect himself. That was a conclusion born from instincts rather than logic.

They had called him a monster for what he did. The heartless actions he took against those who stood against him, relentlessly driving his enemies to their destruction without a second thought.

But he never asked for any of this.

All he ever wanted was to survive; too not disappear like the others.

Could anyone ever understand that?

Yet, as he stood encircled in their warm embrace, for the first time in his life, the young boy felt comforted. That somehow, someway, he too deserved a chance at being understood. That at least in this

moment, he wasn't alone in this wide world.

Kiyotaka was too busy in his thoughts to notice that for a split second, the corners of his lips turned up, but only very slightly, partially forming the expression of an unintentional emotion.

Chisato, whose eyes were closed, and Yukari who was too busy wiping her tears on Kiyotaka's shirt, missed the crack that had fleetingly surfaced on Kiyotaka's face.

But the same could not be said for Honami.

Her head had pulled away from Kiyotaka's body at the right moment to see his impassive expression breaking momentarily, causing her eyes to widen.

It was an unbelievable sight for which she couldn't help but question whether it was reality or an illusion, given that his face had never changed since the day she had met the boy.

'Did I see correctly? Was that a hint of a smile?'

Honami wasn't certain, but chose to be optimistic, believing that the boy, who she saw as an unreachable mountain, had also been moved during his stay at the villa.

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After some time, the group hug eventually came to an end. To alleviate the anguish of her daughters, Chisato suggested taking a few quick photos afterwards, immediately brightening their expressions.

Following their photoshoot, and last farewells, Kiyotaka began making his way towards the door, getting ready to take a seat on the luxury leather material.

But as he was about to enter, Honami called out to him.

"Kiyotaka!"

He turned his head towards the source of sound and felt his breathing momentarily stop at the sight.

"Travel safely, okay?"

Although her words triggered a sense of Déjà vu, it was the expression on her face that commanded most of his attention.

'That smile...'

There was no malice, no resentment, or sadness behind that smile. Rather, it glowed with an indescribable purity, radiating nothing but goodwill and care. The sight reminded him of a girl from the past, forcing him to recollect a memory that he had buried deep at the back of his mind.

In the memory, a day had passed since Kiyotaka had made a brutal example of the child who had tried to take his life during the night, attempting to slice Kiyotaka's throat using a sharp knife.

Naturally, following the merciless show of violence Kiyotaka had put on display, the fourth-generation subjects had decided to steer clear of Kiyotaka's path. The fear he had engraved in their hearts was still fresh, preventing them from taking any aggressive action, at least for now.

Kiyotaka paid no mind to them. As long as they didn't interfere with his learning and ability to absorb the White Room's teachings, he wouldn't make any efforts to drive them to their destruction, yet.

After completing the usual timetable of scheduled activities, Kiyotaka had taken a seat with his tray of food at his usual table situated in room C1.04, getting ready to eat the nutrient rich food.

To Kiyotaka's surprise, Subject G4-005, or rather, Yuki, the violet eyed and blonde haired girl, who had stuck to Kiyotaka like glue ever since their first introduction, sat across from him.

Although his facial expressions didn't change, the same could not be said for his thoughts.

'Why is she still sitting here? Is she not afraid of me after seeing what I'm capable of?'

Kiyotaka could not understand why Yuki still continued to stay by his side even after his merciless actions the previous night.

He wondered whether it was because he was the top student in the curriculum. Perhaps she figured staying close to the strongest would improve her chances of surviving the fourth-generation curriculum. But from Kiyotaka's point of view, that conclusion couldn't be right.

'No, if the priority were survival, she would have had better a chance if she had joined the other fourth-generation factions, who all collectively despise me, right from the start.'

In the first place, Yuki sticking to Kiyotaka was not a logical decision, at least from Kiyotaka's perspective. Interacting with Kiyotaka would lead the other children to assume that Yuki was his ally, painting a target on her back. Such an outcome could have been avoided if she had joined the other subject's collective hatred of Kiyotaka when isolation training had ended.

Yet, she didn't do that and elected to consistently conversate with the young boy whenever she could, implicitly telling Kiyotaka that her thought process was not centred around survival.

This conclusion puzzled Kiyotaka. After all, Kiyotaka had only ever prioritized his own survival and always strived for growth because he understood the fundamental law of the White Room: if you cease to grow you cease to exist. Therefore, he could not understand Yuki's decision to interact with him. Wasn't she also wary of disappearing like the previous fourth-generation students had? Shouldn't her priority be survival?

But he kept these sentiments to himself, at least for now. After all, he wasn't the type to regularly initiate a conversation unless it benefited him in some way.

Yuki, who was sitting across from him, had noticed that Kiyotaka was seemingly in deep thought. Even though he kept his same never-changing poker face, Yuki's felt that there was something on his mind

that was bothering him.

Although Yuki wouldn't admit this aloud, the reason she could sometimes grasp the 'feelings' of the young boy was probably because she spent a little *too* much time closely observing his face, something which Kiyotaka had noticed but never bothered to comment on.

After seeing that Kiyotaka had no desire to talk, Yuki decided to try and start a conversation with the young boy.

"Mmm, Kiyotaka, what are you thinking about?" Yuki curiously asked whilst gently putting her cutlery down and tilting her head, taking on an inquisitive appearance.

Meanwhile, Kiyotaka, who was once lost in thought, was abruptly snapped out of his musings to find Yuki glancing at him, her violet eyes glowing with curiosity.

Yet, the response he gave seemed to upset the young girl.

"Nothing important," Kiyotaka stoically stated before continuing to eat his food, proceeding to ignore Yuki's existence entirely.

A small frown quickly appeared on Yuki's face, as she began pouting.

"Hmpf! Fine! Don't tell me," Yuki huffed indignantly with puffed up cheeks, subsequently closing her eyes before crossing her arms and turning away from Kiyotaka, clearly showing that she was not happy with the young boy.

Kiyotaka didn't bother to humour the girl, electing to finish his meal. Yuki also resumed consuming her 'tasty' food on the tray, occasionally letting out a audible "hmph" to remind the boy that she was annoyed at him.

The truth was that she was actually feigning these acts of irritation. She knew Kiyotaka always gave these concise and callous remarks; that was just his nature. Instead of actually being upset at his responses, she found his retorts amusing—well, only sometimes.

As the two finished their meals, they had a little bit of free time remaining before the next scheduled activity.

Kiyotaka discreetly walked towards a very specific spot in the open space, far enough from the 'hidden' cameras to pick up any traces of audio.

Yuki naturally followed the young boy and was expecting him to just stoically stare off into the distance like he usually does. However, to her surprise the boy actually tried starting a conversation with her.

"Why do you still sit with me during our meals, Yuki?" Kiyotaka asked with his signature blank voice, but there was a trace of curiosity in his tone.

A small smile quickly emerged on Yuki's face. Anytime Kiyotaka talked to her willingly she would always feel a warmth emerge from her insides. But after digesting her response, she started frowning again.

"Hmm? Is there a reason for me not to sit next to you? I've always sat next to you since isolation training stopped, so why would I stop now?"

Hearing her response did nothing to change Kiyotaka's poker face, but it did fan the small ember of curiosity that had been growing ever since Yuki had taken a seat at his table during their meal.

"Are you not afraid of me? Unlike the others, you seem to be unbothered by what I did."

Yuki's expression turned to that of understanding. It seemed that Kiyotaka was confused why Yuki still chose to be by his side even after the extreme violence he had carried out the previous night. Knowing that, Yuki's tone turned more playful as she uttered a semblance of an explanation.

"Silly, there is no way I could be afraid of you, if anything, I was worried at the time of the incident, but now I'm at ease."

Her response confused Kiyotaka, and he was quick to probe her for more information with the same monotone voice he always has.

"At ease? Why?"

Given her young age, Yuki did not know the true nature of her feelings for the boy, making it difficult for her to answer the question with only a few words. Therefore, she elected to respond to his queries by searching for the answer deep within her.

Upon coming up with a decent answer, her voice quickly softened, a warm smile swiftly emerged on her face, one that was so wide that her already squinting eyes closed.

With one hand on her chest, she expressed the words that lay deep within her heart.

"Because I'm glad that you're safe, Kiyotaka."

The memory ended there.

'It's the same expression as Her's...'

But he pushed that thought away, now was not the time to think about her. He had already spent enough time recollecting that memory. If he dwelled anymore it would open the flood gates to other memories which he didn't want to remember.

Thus, Kiyotaka slowly nodded to Honami before entering the car door that slammed shut with a thud.

The black sedan began rumbling away, the sound of crunching gravel became quieter as the two young souls drifted apart.

"I'm glad that we met, Kiyotaka," Honami whispered to herself whilst watching the vehicle's retreating figure, softly tracing her fingers over the honey gold coloured bracelet wrapped around her right hand wrist.

Yukari, upon seeing the shy smile and subtle blush on Honami's face whilst Honami was looking at the bracelet, decided to tease her again. "Hehe, I knew it was the right choice to give *you* the *'friendship'* bracelet, Nami."

Honami's blue eyes widened hearing her sister's 'innocent' words spoken with a devilish tone, sensing an impending catastrophe was about to occur.

"W-What do you mean?" Honami stuttered, hiding her right hand behind her back, failing to notice the growing blush on her face that revealed her true feelings that she wasn't aware of.

Amused by Honami's reaction, Yukari continued her teasing with a playful smirk.

"You know *exactly* what I mean, Nami~! Your little crush—"

Yukari's provocative words abruptly stopped upon seeing Honami quicky rushing towards her, trying to silence her.

"YUKARI!" Honami screeched, quickly grabbing Yukari before relentlessly tickling her.

The atmosphere turned more lighthearted, as laughter filled the open air, disturbing the natural ambience of the isolated location.

But during the heartfelt farewell between Honami's family and Kiyotaka shared moments ago, the suited men lurking from a distance had been watching the entirety of the scene.

Honami didn't know at the time, but the advice Kiyotaka gave her the other night, regarding her father, would be paramount for navigating the storm her family would soon weather.

As for Kiyotaka, he would soon be reminded of a harsh truth he had learned in the White Room years ago: everything comes with a cost.

And the price of freedom, that the small, childlike part of him seeks, would not be cheap.

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A/N: I had originally intended for Chapter 8 to be the final chapter for Volume 0, but it got too lengthy. So, I decided to split it into parts.

Nevertheless, Chapter 9 will be the final chapter in the Volume 0 Arc. Given that a lot of Chapter 9 has already been written, it will probably be released over the next few days, earlier than the usual scheduled release that previous chapters underwent.

Hope you enjoyed the chapter!

V0 - Chapter 9: A Father's Cruelty

Location: Saitama City, Japan

A couple weeks had passed since Genesis.

Atsuomi was seated comfortably back in his private office, working through an assortment of documentation on his encrypted device. He had returned from his expedition across the country, meeting with various investors. Unsurprisingly, some of his current, more enthusiastic investors were also interested in witnessing Kiyotaka's abilities and had showed up at the meetings.

Nevertheless, due to his significant rise in power, the results of the trip were very positive. After all, Atsuomi had become a man of attention following Genesis so enticing investors wasn't a big issue.

Coupled with Kiyotaka's display of prowess, Atsuomi had no trouble procuring an overwhelming amount of support.

Unfortunately, upon his return to his office in Saitama City, the aftermath of Genesis and the formation of the Genesis Party had left a lot of paperwork to sift through, all the more so, given the bureaucracy of creating a new political party following such a shocking event.

His attention was momentarily captured by the buzzing of the reporter on the television, posted high-up in the corner of his office.

"In the past week, various businesses across Japan have declared their full support of the recently formed Genesis Party led by Ayanokōji Atsuomi, following the example of prominent enterprises like, but not limited to, Nogi Pharmaceuticals, Ishigami Group, and the Amasawa Conglomerate."

'Excellent. The Genesis Party is continuing to grow.'

Knowing that he had forcibly turned the tide to his favour, Atsuomi took advantage of the situation to show the public, that even the most prominent corporations in Japan are rising to support the Genesis Party, aligning themselves with the party's vision.

It was a psychological operation, also known as a "PSYOP", to convince even the most skeptical people that Atsuomi's Genesis Party will rise amongst the rubble to lead Japan away from its decline. Atsuomi knew that some people would be skeptical of his move to create a political party following the attempt on his life, which is why he needed to convince them using PSYOPs.

By showing the public that people with significant power in the country are shifting to support the Genesis Party, Atsuomi created an air of legitimacy, stability, and trust, that will increase the citizens' support of the Genesis Party. After all, a lot of these companies are crucial to Japan's economy and provide a great deal of the workforce.

Additionally, a lot of these businesses provide funding to mainstream media outlets, using their platforms for advertising or other purposes. Therefore, with these institutions moving to support the Genesis Party, the mainstream media in Japan will be forced to sing to Atsuomi's tune. Thereby making it easier to deliver future propaganda to further the growth of the Genesis Party whilst suppressing any other political parties.

In short, broadcasting their support of the Genesis Party sends a strong message to the public: "If these wealthy organisations are backing Atsuomi, then it the Genesis Party must be the right choice." The mainstream media will continue to engrave that message into the public's mind.

Reinforcing the idea that the Genesis Party is the only viable option to rule the country is necessary for Atsuomi's future goals.

After glancing at the bottom right of his screen, Atsuomi realised it would be a good time to take a break and catch the sight of the setting sun before continuing with his work.

Rising from his chair, Atsuomi stalked towards the nearby curtains, drawing them back with a swish.

The dwindling rays of sunlight immediately kissed his skin, providing a gentle warmth.

His golden eyes shone with ambition whilst staring off into the orange hues that coloured the city landscape, pondering on the future but also the past.

'The vision I had is slowly coming to fruition. Operation: Genesis, for the most part, is a success.'

Operation: Genesis was only possible through the efforts made in the prior Operation: Erebus.

'It all started with Senator Kijima's appearance in politics.'

Whilst Atsuomi was building up his organisation in absolute secrecy, Senator Kijima had been making waves in Japan, his influence increasing due to his stellar reputation, endless charisma, and most importantly, his hand in the foundation of ANHS and close relationship with Prime Minister Miyako.

With such a powerful player emerging, most people would think that there was no point to inserting yourself in the game, anticipating that they would most likely get stuck in Kijima's shadow.

But Atsuomi thought differently.

'Kijima's increasing influence enabled me to conduct Operation: Erebus, utilising the Shadows of the White Room.'

Naoe and Isomaru, who had been slugging at each other for years in the Citizens' Party were caught off guard by Kijima's increase in power. As a result, their resources started to slowly bleed, as more and more competent members in their faction gradually shifted to the Kijima faction. Consequently, holes were inevitably left in Naoe's and Isomaru's factions, presenting Atsuomi with an opening to insert the Shadows of the White Room into their circles. Naoe and Isomaru, who were too distracted by Kijima's rapidly increasing favour among the people, had accepted these individuals into their factions, trusting

their carefully constructed backstories designed to avoid suspicion.

Meanwhile, the Peace Party was already fighting amongst themselves, in particular senior member, Ryosuke, who was very busy with acquiring his spot as the party's representative candidate for future elections. In short, Ryosuke's attention was diverted to the power struggle occurring in the Peace Party, leaving openings for Atsuomi to slip the Shadows into his ranks.

Atsuomi also took this opportunity to infiltrate the Kijima and Miyako factions, using the fact that they had a large influx of members to hide his operatives. They would create variables during Operation: Genesis and in the future, that would prove to be useful to Atsuomi.

To summarise, Kijima's emergence in politics cast a shadow, providing Atsuomi cover to hide his operations from the other major powers, resulting in his operatives rapidly rising in the ranks of the enemy groups. Of course, Atsuomi made sure to limit communications with the Shadows burrowed in their circles, ensuring that they were not compromised early on.

As time passed, Kijima's influence continued to grow, which meant that Naoe's and Isomaru's presence in the Citizens' Party slowly dwindled, as more of their members left their factions.

'At that point, I was certain Naoe and Isomaru were probably going to be looking to hinder Kijima's growth, possibly teaming up together to push him back.'

Atsuomi was sure of this conclusion, after all, in the past, Naoe had taken him in from the streets and cared for him for years. During those times, he was able to grasp Naoe's thought process and quickly understood Isomaru's thinking through Naoe's words of guidance.

By the time Naoe inevitably cut ties with Atsuomi, it was already too late. He had acquired all that he needed, his skills and mind honed and prepared to achieve his future goals.

Atsuomi felt no guilt or sorrow in orchestrating Naoe's death. To Atsuomi, Naoe was never a 'father figure'—just a means to an end.

'But the cuts that had been inflicted upon them by Kijima's appearance were not great enough, so I had other measures prepared.'

Although it is true that Kijima's rise in popularity was mainly attributed to his role in the creation of ANHS, as well as his close relationship with Prime Minister Miyako, those things alone would not be enough to explain his rapidly increasing influence that *never* seemed to slow down. After all, ANHS had been around for quite some time.

Atsuomi had originally intended to wait and let Isomaru and Naoe gradually weaken, but the process was not quick enough.

He quickly realised that Operation: Erebus would take too long to complete if he didn't take immediate action.

Plans had to be adaptable, fluid and have contingencies prepared, which is why Atsuomi immediately implemented a solution to fast forward to the end objective of Operation: Erebus.

'The second part of Operation: Erebus was using the Shadows of the White Room we installed in the enemy circles, as well as other Shadows in Kijima's faction, to boost Kijima's reputation.'

That's right, Atsuomi poured gasoline on the growing fire that was Kijima's power, pushing out propaganda to increase Kijima's presence. Examples of the many measures taken include helping with the construction of **billboards** around Tokyo, just like the ones Naoe had seen in Shinjuku, or subtly inviting Kijima to interviews or **late-night-talk shows** broadcasted on **radio stations** to increase his public presence. These actions would persist throughout Operation: Erebus and Operation: Genesis.

Kijima, who was busy with his own campaigning, probably attributed the increase in fame as his own success due to his faction's already rapid growth, not suspecting that a hidden organisation was boosting his growing reputation.

As a result, more and more weight piled onto Naoe and Isomaru, pressuring them to join together to combat Kijima as well as Miyako. In Atsuomi's mind, it was a necessity to corner Naoe and Isomaru,

making them feel like the walls were closing in on them. That mindset would be important for Operation: Genesis.

Some may argue that Naoe might've joined Kijima, forsaking the position of Prime Minister to maintain his meagre power.

But Atsuomi knew that was an impossibility.

Atsuomi was certain that Naoe would join forces with Isomaru, rather than Kijima. After all, Naoe was getting old and Atsuomi knew Naoe's ambition was to become Prime Minister. Naoe selling his soul to Kijima would be equivalent to giving up his dream, something which he would not do as far as Atsuomi was concerned.

After all, Atsuomi, who had been in Naoe's care for years in the past, knew Naoe's goals and thought process, thereby making it was easy for him to anticipate Naoe's movements, pushing Naoe towards the path he desired.

On the other hand, although Atsuomi predicted this outcome, he didn't know exactly when they would join forces.

Therefore, instead of using the Shadows, who were busy with carrying out other orders and gaining trust within the enemy groups, Atsuomi instructed his head of intelligence, Takahashi, to keep watch of Naoe and Isomaru, simultaneously hiding the existence of the Shadows from Takahashi. A necessary action that would be important later on in Operation: Genesis.

'At this point, the time was ripe to start my journey in the political world, entering the saturated Citizens' Party.'

Following the Shadows' efforts in boosting Kijima's presence, Atsuomi knew it was his time to make an appearance in politics. With the public perception gradually shifting away from the seniority system and moving towards supporting youthful talent, despite the old guard's efforts to misdirect the public, Atsuomi made his debut in the Citizens' Party.

The Citizens' Party had a more favourable view of the youth due to Kijima's influence, making it the ideal party to continue his plans.

Joining the Peace Party would be the worst decision, considering how particularly spiteful the old guard's members were there.

Thus, Atsuomi acquired a position in the Citizens' Party, making various actions to support the youth, such as providing funds to children's hospitals, gradually winning favour and increasing his presence in the political world.

He reduced his efforts in promoting Kijima and began using his social communications team to administer propaganda to the public, pedestalising himself as someone who cares for the youth. Atsuomi knew that narrative presented to the Japanese citizens would be important later on during Operation: Genesis.

At the same time, there would be other young blood attempting to start their career in Japanese politics, trying to follow Kijima's example. However, they would inevitably fall because they did not have the money to make a dent in the treacherous landscape that is Japanese politics.

But more importantly, once Atsuomi had made his presence known to the public, Naoe would be carefully watching him.

'I was certain Naoe's eyes would be focused on me, given our prior history, my appearance in the Citizens' Party, and my mysterious surge in finances despite being cut off by him.'

Takahashi's report confirmed that reporters had been sent by Naoe to investigate Atsuomi's finances, proving his theory correct, demonstrating the fact that Naoe was wary of his appearance in politics and his source of funding.

More importantly, Takahashi's report also confirmed that Naoe and Isomaru had joined forces, just as Atsuomi had predicted.

'Takahashi was an important piece in my future plans, which is why I had to give him the impression that the information was unexpected.'

This is where Atsuomi feigned surprise to Takahashi's findings, hiding the fact that he already expected as much. In Atsuomi's mind, he had to make Takahashi believe that the information was new, planting

the thought of "I control what information Ayankōji-sensei sees and doesn't see", implicitly hiding the existence of the Shadows. This psychological manoeuvre would be important later on during Operation: Genesis.

'With Naoe and Isomaru keeping their eye on me, evident by the reporters they sent to investigate my finances, their attention had been successfully shifted away.'

A diversion tactic; the other purpose behind making his debut in the Citizens' Party.

Joining the Citizens' Party drew Naoe's and Isomaru's ire. As a result, their attention was focussed on gathering information on Atsuomi's operations. Thus, misdirecting them from their own faction's composition and thereby giving Atsuomi's agents more flexibility to move behind enemy lines to collect more valuable intelligence.

In the event that the diversion tactic was not as effective as Atsuomi intended, it wouldn't be a big issue.

After all, even if Naoe and Isomaru were paying attention to their party's composition, they would be carefully watching for potential spies among the *new people* joining their faction rather than the relatively more veteran members. How could they know that Atsuomi had been infiltrating their factions for a long time prior to making his appearance?

As a result, through all these efforts, the purpose of Operation: Erebus was complete.

The Shadows' reach had extended to the highest ranks of the enemy without the enemy knowing.

That included Ryosuke as well. Ryosuke's attention was concentrated on consolidating his power, meaning he would be unaware that the Shadows had already dug deep into his organisation.

*'All of this would have not been possible without **his** help, of course.'*

The said man Atsuomi was referencing was the enigma with the code name "Jack", leader of the Shadows of the White Room.

With Jack's assistance, Atsuomi engineered **an opportunity** to enact Operation: Genesis. Jack was aware of his role and started the operation upon receiving Atsuomi's order, which occurred shortly after Atsuomi received the intelligence report from Takahashi.

'With the Shadows stationed in higher ranks of the enemy and being able to move more freely, the information we collected was vast.'

Identities of enemy agents, scale of operations, finances, security, and any sort of sensitive information that would want to be hidden.

With all of that information one might think it would be easy to dispose of Naoe, Isomaru and Ryosuke, but doing so would only benefit Kijima and Miyako. Atsuomi had to construct a scheme such that he would be the only one benefitting whilst simulatenously hiding his hand that was pulling the strings.

It was that goal that led to the foundation of Operation: Genesis during the extensive planning phase prior to Operation: Erebus.

Operation: Genesis was when key pieces like Takahashi would shine.

'Takahashi would serve as a Trojan Horse, a gift to let Naoe and Isomaru believe they held the advantage.'

Although Atsuomi had employed Takahashi because he was good at his job, there was another critical reason; the fact that he had a mother who he cared dearly for and had hid from Atsuomi.

By feeding Takahashi's personal information to Naoe's agents, whose identities had been exposed thanks to the success of Operation: Erebus, Atsuomi deliberately exposed Takahashi's weakness, anticipating that Naoe would exploit it.

This is where the prior measures taken during Operation: Erebus would come into play.

Due to Naoe having been forced to ally with Isomaru to combat Miyako and Kijima because of the added pressure Atsuomi applied by boosting Kijima's popularity, Naoe was forced into a situation where he couldn't afford to reject any opportunities that could be rewarding.

Coupling that with the fact that Atsuomi had also publicly made his appearance in the Citizens' Party to draw attention to himself, Naoe would be led to think "if I don't act now, I may never get a chance again." All the more so, given that Naoe was getting old, and his influence was dwindling, demanding more bold but risky actions if he wanted to maintain his power.

That was why it was crucial to boost Kijima's presence and psychologically pressure Naoe earlier in Operation: Erebus. That pressure would ensure Naoe would not reject the personal information of Takahashi, Atsuomi's head of intelligence disguised as a Greek gift.

Naoe acting on the intel was one thing, but to guarantee his involvement, Atsuomi had to manipulate Naoe into trusting the information to a certain degree. Naoe would only take a gamble if a decent return was possible.

That was why Atsuomi ensured that Naoe received the intel from Sugimoto, Naoe's right hand man. As a result, Naoe would trust the information having received it from Sugimoto, who in turn gathered the intel from his operatives.

Sugimoto would not doubt the intelligence given that his long-standing agents would have obtained it. But he could not know that, thanks to the efforts made during Operation: Erebus, the identities of his spies had long since been discovered by Atsuomi.

Setting up a scenario for Sugimoto's operatives to receive said information would be no issue for the Shadows led by the master of deception, Jack.

From there, Naoe would inform his ally Isomaru, who would also trust the intel since their relationship was built on mutual interests. Isomaru had also been forced into a corner, thanks to Operation: Erebus, and would assist his temporary ally, Naoe,

'But the most critical aspect was for Naoe and Isomaru to trust Takahashi.'

Atsuomi strengthened Naoe's and Isomaru's trust in Takahashi by

deliberately exposing Natsue's identity, anticipating that Naoe would use her to blackmail Takahashi. Naoe would not suspect future information he received from Takahashi to be incorrect given that Naoe had organised the blackmail himself.

But the critical factor to buy Naoe's and Isomaru's trust was Takahashi's reaction to Natsue being captured.

Since Takahashi was kept out of the loop due to the efforts made in Operation: Erebus, and Atsuomi keeping the existence of the Shadows hidden, his expressions to Natsue being kidnapped would be 'organic' and genuine, assuring Naoe and his ally, Isomaru, that this wasn't a ploy by Atsuomi, effectively lowering their guard.

'I knew what day Naoe and Isomaru would execute their plan based on the information collected from the Shadows burrowed deep in their organisation.'

Jack would lead the Shadows to monitor Takahashi on the day of Natsue's capture. Atsuomi let Jack use whatever method he deemed fit. As long as he completed the objectives assigned without exposing his hand, then Atsuomi wouldn't care.

Those objectives being following Takahashi when he meets with Naoe and Isomaru, as well as following Natsue and her kidnappers. Natsue would be an important factor later on during Operation: Genesis.

'Based on the intel I receive, Takahashi had become their double agent after being blackmailed, aligning with my initial prediction. I knew he wouldn't ask for my help because from his perspective, he believes that it's his fault for failing to inform me of his mother's existence. His only priority would be saving his mother rather than trying to find out who leaked his personal information.'

With Takahashi now being a double agent, Atsuomi had to increase the value of Takahashi seen from Naoe's and Isomaru's perspective. This is where the efforts made in Operation: Erebus would make a difference, specifically that psychological manoeuvre Atsuomi had conducted.

Recall that during Operation: Erebus, Atsuomi deliberately told Takahashi to keep tabs on Naoe and Isomaru and report any findings. Although this was to hide the Shadows existence and let them focus on gaining trust within the enemy circles and bolstering Kijima's reputation, there was a more important goal to be achieved by taking this action.

That goal being that once Takahashi told Atsuomi that Naoe and Isomaru had joined forces, an outcome Atsuomi already predicted, Atsuomi would intentionally feign surprise to the news, planting the thought in Takahashi's mind that "sensei didn't know about this".

Showing that the information was unexpected would reinforce the perception that Takahashi already had, given his role as head of intelligence, of "I'm responsible for what information sensei receives and what information he doesn't receive."

As a result, when Takahashi's tells Naoe and Isomaru about information he does know, he would explain them his role as head of intelligence and assure them that he was Atsuomi's sole source of information.

Takahashi wouldn't doubt this conclusion, and neither would Naoe and Isomaru upon witnessing his unwavering conviction, which would significantly contrast Takahashi's prior fearful expression when he saw his mother's condition.

However, at the same time, they would also understand Takahashi's limitations, especially since Takahashi would tell them how well compartmentalised information is within Atsuomi's circle. Leading them to the conclusion that Takahashi is an asset they don't want to lose, at least until they remove Atsuomi.

After all, if information is so well controlled, then the only way they could obtain anything valuable would be by using Takahashi, thus increasing Takahashi's value from their perspective.

Coupling these points with extraneous factors like Kijima's increasing influence, which Atsuomi was subtly boosting, and Atsuomi's growing popularity, Naoe and Isomaru would know that they were low on time. Their plot against Atsuomi had to be decisive if they wanted to

stand a chance against Kijima and Miyako in the future, thereby implicitly increasing Takahashi's usefulness to them.

'With Takahashi being a double agent, who Naoe and Isomaru trust, the time was right for us to forcibly change Takahashi's allegiance.'

After a couple days, Jack would make contact with Takahashi, using any method he deemed necessary to ensure Takahashi became a triple agent. Atsuomi left the creation of contingencies in Jack's capable hands. For example, Shohei Takamura, or rather Shiba Katsunori, keeping tabs on Takahashi as a fail-safe in the event that Takahashi decides to do something foolish.

'Knowing Takahashi, he would easily comply with that man's demands.'

Atsuomi was certain that Takahashi would not deny the opportunity presented to him, especially with the assurance given by Jack that his mother could be safely rescued, something only possible because Jack had his Shadows follow the individuals who kidnapped Natsue; this was why Natsue was important.

Obviously, Jack, did not reveal that they had been following Natsue's kidnappers; instead, he would provide Takahashi with vaguee yet specific details later on to lull Takahashi into a false sense of security, making him naively believe that everything would be okay in the end if he followed orders.

'It would be in Takahashi's interest to latch onto the olive branch handed to him, given that he only cares about his mother's safety. After all, from his perspective, there was no guarantee that Naoe or Isomaru would spare his mother in the end.'

Meanwhile, the Shadows would leak pieces of information to Ryosuke's agents within the Citizens' Party. Atsuomi had been psychologically profiling Ryosuke for a long time, using intel provided by the Shadows, who had infiltrated Ryosuke's organisation during the Peace Party's power struggle.

Having been familiarised with Ryosuke's opportunistic nature, Atsuomi knew that Ryosuke wouldn't able be able to resist getting involved. He would look for any method to raise the Peace Party's

power, especially since it was an opportunity to deal a critical blow to the Citizens' Party; a circumstance that would make the veteran politician salivate at the mouth.

'The next move was to ensure Naoe and Isomaru did not doubt Takahashi once Ryosuke made contact.'

On the behest of Jack's orders, Takahashi would proceed to give curated information, exposing 'important' information.

At the time of his blackmail, Takahashi hadn't told Naoe and Isomaru about the name "White Room", opting to save the information to divulge later as insurance to ensure his mother is kept safe and that he is still seen as valuable to Naoe and Isomaru. After all, in his mind, it would be in his best interest to give information in pieces, buying more time to collect other intelligence if he doesn't come across any sensitive intel in the future.

Jack relentlessly exploited that decision Takahashi made.

If on the odd chance that Takahashi had already told Naoe and Isomaru about the name "White Room", it wouldn't matter. Other 'important' information could just be substituted to keep the bond of trust intact.

Hence, Takahashi fed the name "White Room" and its purpose as a facility, and the existence of Atsuomi's son to Naoe and Isomaru. The intelligence was new, solidifying trust between Takahashi, Naoe, and Isomaru, as well as increasing Takahashi's value to them.

But more importantly, Takahashi would also tell them about Atsuomi's plans to travel with his son to meet investors across Japan. Naoe and Isomaru would draw their own conclusions, but either way, Atsuomi acquiring funds would be detrimental and perhaps even 'fatal' to them, forcing them to take more drastic actions, especially since they were running out of time thanks to the pressure applied to them during Operation: Erebus.

Some may say that there was a risk of Naoe or Isomaru releasing the 'sensitive' information from Takahashi publicly, but Atsuomi judged this to be an almost improbable decision, based on his understanding

of their thought processes.

Firstly, thanks to how well information is compartmentalised within Atsuomi's circle, right from the start, Takahashi did not possess any actual sensitive information that could create unexpected variables, thereby keeping Atsuomi's plans from being jeopardised.

For example, knowing the "White Room" only in name wouldn't be detrimental nor would be it difficult to cover up. In fact, Atsuomi might be able to use it to his advantage, citing it as the old guard trying to slander the young talent, thus, winning more favour with the people whose sentiment had gradually shifted towards supporting the youth.

Secondly, Atsuomi's psychological manipulation of Naoe and Isomaru, through using Takahashi as a trojan horse, and efforts made in Operation: Erebus, ensured they would not leak the name "White Room".

This is because Atsuomi's prior actions had cornered Naoe and Isomaru into a situation where they had to take extreme measures to make a comeback.

Given their old age, dwindling influence, Kijima's presence, Atsuomi joining the Citizens' Party and Atsuomi travelling to procure more funding, they were led to believe that if they didn't make a decisive move against Atsuomi soon, they would crumble.

Those factors would lead them to the conclusion "it would be best to keep the intel to ourselves", especially since they were planning to assassinate the man.

Additionally, from their perspective, seeing that the reporters sent by Naoe had gone missing told them that Atsuomi has raised his guard against them. Releasing what they believe to be confidential information would immediately jeopardise Takahashi's role as a double agent, ultimately leading to them losing their 'advantage'.

Unbeknownst to them, Atsuomi had carried out the removal of the reporters with that goal in mind.

Lastly, releasing 'sensitive' information would also likely hinder their plans to assassinate Atsuomi. After all, they knew Atsuomi was smart enough to realise there was a traitor in his circle once 'sensitive' information was leaked, resulting in Atsuomi being more wary and cautious. As a result, they decrease their chances of successfully assassinating Atsuomi; at least that would be their interpretation.

To summarise, all of these factors ensured that Naoe and Isomaru would not release Takahashi's intelligence to the public, and would start making preparations to assassinate Atsuomi after learning of his plans to acquire more money from investors.

But to their dismay, this was the exact moment when Ryosuke would enter the game, who was unknowingly dancing in Atsuomi's palm.

'Ryosuke would eventually make contact and organise a meeting. I knew as such because of the intel from the Shadows who had planted themselves in the Peace Party during Operation: Erebus.'

Naoe and Isomaru would be distraught learning that their kidnapping of Natsue had been exposed. Since Ryosuke made contact, Atsuomi knew they would assume someone in their faction had turned traitor.

They wouldn't suspect Takahashi since the critical information Takahashi had provided was very helpful, especially the detailed itinerary report he would send to them later onwards.

That and the fact that they knew how much Takahashi cared for his mother due to his volatile reaction at the time of the kidnapping, would reassure them that Takahashi was still on their side; that they still held the advantage over Atsuomi and could make a comeback.

'Naoe, Isomaru and Ryosuke would join hands temporarily.'

The political situation for Naoe and Isomaru wasn't looking good for them. Atsuomi's growing presence and Kijima's immense popularity had driven them into a corner, an outcome Atsuomi had accelerated during Operation: Erebus by boosting Kijima's popularity and inserting himself into the game.

Therefore, with their shrinking resources Naoe and Isomaru would

have no choice but to join hands with Ryosuke, utilising Ryosuke's resources to increase the probability of a successful assassination.

Alternatively, on the odd chance that Naoe and Isomaru were not willing to cooperate with Ryosuke, Atsuomi knew Ryosuke would subtly strongman them to do his bidding; an act that would fit with Ryosuke's character.

'Once they had shared information, Ryosuke would learn about my plans to travel across the country to acquire funds, forcing him to take drastic actions.'

Atsuomi obtaining funds would be detrimental to Ryosuke in the long run. After all, Atsuomi receiving more money would increase the risk of Atsuomi becoming a powerful faction within the Citizens' Party, rendering the factions headed by Naoe and Isomaru as obsolete. As a result, the Citizens' Party would be relatively more stable because the power is divided relatively less. Atsuomi knew that was an unfavourable outcome for Ryosuke and used that fact to catch Ryosuke in his web.

As a result, Ryosuke would be forced to cooperate with Naoe and Isomaru, changing his perception of his involvement in the ploy from being "an opportunity" to a "necessity". This was critical because Atsuomi couldn't disregard the possibility that Ryosuke might remain in the sidelines and just watch the chaos ensue.

For Operation: Genesis to be a success, Ryosuke's participation was mandatory. He would serve as Atsuomi's scapegoat.

'Ryosuke would also withhold his desire to expose the existence of my son and the White Room to the public for similar reasons to Naoe and Isomaru.'

After all, Ryosuke wouldn't expose the contents of Takahashi's report to the public because it would be detrimental to his own goals.

All of the aforementioned predictions were proven correct based on the Shadows' intel, assuring Atsuomi that everything was going in accordance to his will.

'The Shadows used the superior surveillance technology we possess to know their exact plans.'

The said technology was sourced from Kuromiya Renji, the lead researcher at Atsuomi's covert research and development facility. Atsuomi had visited the facility months back to check on the progress of the surveillance equipment.

'After analysing the crafted itinerary report from Takahashi, detailing my travel route and security, they would quickly realise the best method to kill me would be to assassinate me in the tunnel.'

Atsuomi had already predicted that they would stage an assassination and try to eliminate him. His theory rang true based on the evidence collected from the meeting between Naoe, Isomaru and Ryosuke. But he had to make sure that they tried to kill him in a way that could be countered easily, after all, his presence in the SUVs was mandatory for Operation: Genesis to be a success.

Which is why, first, Atsuomi carefully constructed the route of travel in the itinerary report to lead them to the conclusion that the tunnel would be the best spot to assassinate Atsuomi. The overwhelming geographical advantage of using the tunnel to trap the SUVs would convince them to use such a strategy, especially since the detailed travel route had no other locations with greater advantages to carry out the assassination.

Additionally, the time of travel was early in the morning for minimum traffic, and the route was skillfully designed to go through areas with low traffic, giving more merit to the pretext of 'covert' that Takahashi provided.

'But there were other factors considered when designing the route, specifically manipulating what tactics they would use to kill me.'

After all, there were many unknown variables that Atsuomi had to deal with to reduce the risk since his presence in the SUVs was a necessity for Operation: Genesis to be a success.

One of the best methods to eliminate variables and options for Naoe, Isomaru, and Ryosuke, was to shorten their preparation time.

Since they were already committed to assassinating Atsuomi, for the reasons mentioned previously, they would have no choice but to go through with the assassination, even if they had less time to prepare. By doing so, Atsuomi limited the options for which Naoe, Isomaru and Ryosuke could employ to kill him.

Due to their limited time, acquiring materials for explosives or purchasing an assortment of guns would be improbable, even with Ryosuke's resources due to how strict gun laws were in Japan. Acquiring those sorts of weapons in a small-time interval and doing so without leaving any traces would require a significant level of influence, something which Ryosuke, Naoe and Isomaru did not possess.

Therefore, it would be in the best interests of Ryosuke, Naoe and Isomaru, to avoid using guns or explosives because it would be too risky to use and harder to cover up. After all, the priority for each of them would be assassinating Atsuomi without getting caught.

As a result, the variable of guns had been eliminated.

'However, that was not enough to ensure my safety.'

On the extremely rare chance that they actually consider using explosives, Atsuomi had other preparations made.

For starters, Takahashi was instructed to tell Naoe, Isomaru and Ryosuke that he was only responsible for creating a route for the convoy from a specific point; he had no knowledge of where the vehicles were located before that point, making it impossible to plant a bomb on the car before Atsuomi entered the vehicle. Even if they somehow managed to plant an IED on the middle SUV, Takahashi told them that Atsuomi's security detail would have sweeped the vehicle before letting Atsuomi enter.

As a result, Naoe, Isomaru, and Ryosuke would naturally reach the conclusion that it was an impossibility to plant an explosive on the SUVs.

One might say that the explosive devices could be planted at the tunnel, but this would be a wrong assertion.

This is because Atsuomi had ensured the route Takahashi supplied to Naoe, Isomaru and Ryosuke was designed to specifically include a bridge above the tunnel. By doing so, it would discourage them from using explosives because if the bridge collapses from the impact, the catastrophe could be designated as a "terrorist attack" or a "national security risk" and invite more rigorous investigation from more powerful government intelligence bureaus, significantly increasing the risk of them getting caught.

Coupled with the threat of civilian deaths if they planted bombs elsewhere outside the tunnel, it would be too risky to use explosives in any way.

All these measures were imperative to leading Naoe, Isomaru, and Ryosuke to the conclusion that using explosives was impossible.

As a result, the variable of explosives had also been eliminated.

'With that risk was minimised to an acceptable level.'

There was always going to be a degree of risk, especially since Atsuomi was going to be in the SUVs. However, the danger had been minimized and there was much more to be gained by being in the SUVs, at least from Atsuomi's perspective.

Even if the impossible did occur, and explosives were rigged, the Shadows, who would be closely observing the events, would be ready in position to remove them.

It is important to note that Naoe, Isomaru and Ryosuke would not suspect anything is wrong with the design of the route because of their trust in Takahashi, a trust derived from Atsuomi pulling the strings. Therefore, they would be completely unaware that they were falling right into Atsuomi's hand.

'Since using explosives and guns was not an option, it was easy to predict their next best option.'

Knowing the thought processes of Naoe, Isomaru and Ryosuke, allowed Atsuomi to predict the tactics they would use. Given that explosives and guns were not options for the reasons cited earlier,

Atsuomi knew that for the fastest 'clean up' process and lowest risk, they would use melee weapons to conduct the assassination.

As a contingency plan, Atsuomi wrote fabricated details of his security detail's weaponry, understating the level of defence. This would give Naoe, Isomaru and Ryosuke false confidence and assure them that the use of melee weapons was a viable strategy, especially considering that they would have significant advantage in terms of numbers—at least, that's what they believed.

In the end, Atsuomi's theory was proven true given that the intel the Shadows collected from the meeting showed that Ryosuke, Naoe and Isomaru would be using an immobilisation and melee weapon strategy.

'The Shadows inserted deep within their organisations ensured we were aware of the full extent of their plans, including locations of their surveillance and ground team.'

Thus, the stage for Atsuomi's assassination was set. Now actions had to be executed to stop 'their' assassination scheme.

'Using the AI, Cypher, the evidence that the Shadows collected was 'adjusted' to paint a different picture.'

The evidence would suggest that the purpose of Atsuomi's trip, on the day of the attack, was to visit hospitals housing underprivileged children rather than meeting investors, reinforcing the narrative of "Atsuomi is a person who cares for the youth". Of course this was a last resort contingency given that Atsuomi didn't want the evidence to be publicly available, yet.

Also, although the AI is very advanced, there is still room for improvement. Tampering with the evidence excessively could expose inconsistencies, which is why small adjustments were deemed to be safe and could avoid detection, at least with this era's modern technology.

'Hiroshi, a piece I had been monitoring for quite some time, would make his move when presented with the tampered evidence.'

Atsuomi was aware that Hiroshi had changed his name from Ichinose Kameda to Hiroshi Kameda with the help of an acquaintance from the National Police Agency (NPA), Hoshikawa Takumi, who held a relatively high position within the organisation, specifically in charge of the Security Bureau also known as the NPA Security Bureau.

He also knew that Hiroshi was an anomaly among the other police in the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department, one of the few willing to investigate Naoe and Isomaru to the point where he practically neglected his family, which made Hiroshi useful to his plans.

Hiroshi's relentless pursuit for justice assured Atsuomi that Hiroshi would use the evidence provided, despite not knowing the sender's intentions.

Other than Hoshikawa, Hiroshi didn't have many people he could trust. But he could use the evidence he received to gain Atsuomi's favour and protect his family. That was the outcome Atsuomi was expecting and waiting for.

'And that's exactly what happened, he came to me informing me of the assassination with certain conditions attached. Naturally I feigned surprise to the news but also agreed to his proposal of using myself as bait, feeding him sweet lies to solidify his trust in me.'

Atsuomi feigned concern for his own son's safety, telling Hiroshi that he would keep him in a safehouse which could also house Hiroshi's family. Seeing that Atsuomi valued family convinced Hiroshi that he could put his trust in the man.

Even if Hiroshi hadn't proposed the notion of Atsuomi using himself as bait, Atsuomi would have done so anyway, using the pretext of "fighting for the betterment of Japan" to move Hiroshi's righteous heart.

After ensuring Hiroshi's family's safety, the next step would be to gather enough forces.

Hiroshi mentioned that he had a contact within the NPA, Hoshikawa, that would help with stopping the assassination.

In the past, Hoshikawa had helped Hiroshi with **changing his name**, which required a certain degree of influence only possible with a relatively high position within the NPA, but said he wouldn't assist Hiroshi any further.

Although the NPA operated under the influence of the central government, members with enough authority could operate independently with a great enough degree of autonomy.

The NPA has five different bureaus: Community Safety, Criminal Affairs, Traffic, Security and Cyber Affairs. Each bureau is operated under a director, who reports to NPA Commissioner General.

Given that Hoshikawa is the Director of the Security Bureau within the NPA, with valid justification, he has the authority to keep out any powerful parties from interfering, including Prime Minister Miyako. The justificaiton of it being a conflict of interest was a suitable if he were ever questioned, given that Naoe and Isomaru, who were high members from the ruling party, were involved in the scandal. After all, the threat of a coverup was a definite possibility if information wasn't kept strictly on a need-to-know basis.

But what Hiroshi could not know was that Hoshikawa had been blackmailed by Jack, who had kidnapped Hoshikawa's family, via Atsuomi's orders, a contingency plan to ensure that Hoshikawa did not turn away Hiroshi's request for help. After all, Atsuomi required Hiroshi's family for his **other plans**.

The other purpose of blackmailing Hoshikawa ensured that the evidence given by Hiroshi would not fall into the wrong hands, such as the NPA General Commissioner, who could report the incident to his respective higher ups, thereby eliminating any chance of unexpected variables emerging.

'With that, everything was arranged to stop their assassination from being successful, simultaneously capturing all their grunt workers and framing Ryosuke for the deaths of Naoe and Isomaru.'

Hoshikawa, with the NPA Security Bureau's resources, would lead the efforts in preventing the assassination. Stopping the communications team set up by Hasegawa, arresting the ground team, and recording

Ryosuke's guilt by cutting a deal with Hasegawa. The Shadows would secretly fill in the gaps, for example, setting up jammers to block communication between Sugimoto and Naoe, a fail-safe in case the terrain of the tunnel didn't fully scramble their communication devices.

The Shadows would also plant evidence that would implicate Ryosuke as the mastermind who ordered his men to carry out the killing of Naoe and Isomaru, serving as the perfect scape goat. From an investigator's perspective, it would look like Ryosuke was trying to cover up his involvement in the scandal and redirect the blame to his political opponents. An important narrative that would be pivotal in reconstructing the public's perception of the incident.

As an added backup plan, Hoshikawa, as the lead investigator and Director of NPA Security Bureau, would close the investigation with the conclusion that Ryosuke's men were behind the killing of Naoe and Isomaru, shutting the door for any further inquiry into the incident.

The central government would not be able to interfere due to a conflict of interest. Even if they did, the evidence on site would lead them to the conclusion Atsuomi wanted them to think.

'Killing Naoe and Isomaru was necessary measure. Only through death can all variables be eliminated.'

Meanwhile, information would be subtly leaked to the press to increase public awareness of the incident. Hidden reporters from Atsuomi's social communications team burrowed within different media outlets would conduct interviews, asking carefully worded questions to elicit the best responses from Atsuomi.

Before the incident, thanks to Atsuomi's social communications department, his reputation was steadily rising as someone who stands against the seniority system. His charitable acts for the youth, particularly children, resulted in people comparing him to Kijima.

But Atsuomi had to create a clear distinction that elevated him above Kijima, whilst pushing Kijima down.

Which is why, by presenting himself as a hero who was willing to risk his life to catch the masterminds, as well as the foot soldiers and related crime syndicates, he immediately won the hearts of the Japanese people. Seeing that he is a man of action rather than words would solidify their trust in him.

The Citizens' Party would be dealt a crippling blow due to Naoe and Isomaru being involved in the attack. Miyako's popularity would plummet, but so would Senator Kijima's.

'The greater the height, the greater they fall.'

Kijima, whose popularity had been rigorously boosted by the Shadows, would fall from grace due to the Citizens' Party decline; his idealistic methods and lack of action being criticised as meaningless in the face of Atsuomi's bold and 'heroic' decisions.

The Peace Party would collapse with Ryosuke's hefty sins, as well as the numerous scandals in the past, all the more so, considering that Ryosuke was going to be the representative of the political party for the next election.

The rapid decline of the Citizens' Party and inevitable collapse of the Peace Party set the stage for Atsuomi, the 'hero' of the nation to announce the formation of the new **Genesis Party**.

His speech would go on in history to mark the day of Genesis, a beginning of a new era with Atsuomi as the father of the new nation.

The official story presented to the public would portray Atsuomi as the underdog, who rose above the seniority system that had tried to suppress him, and cleansed Japan of it's filth.

Propaganda, as well as PSYOPs, that would follow would be enough to pull the wool over the public's eyes, especially once Atsuomi gained absolute control of the mainstream media. The public wouldn't get the full details of evidence that the NPA had gathered, only the curated details fed by the news.

Smearing Kijima's name by using the mainstream media, would also be no issue due to the tremendous advantage Atsuomi had created for

himself.

On the other side of things, even if some people wondered why Ryosuke, Naoe and Isomaru, who were in opposing parties, wanted to kill Atsuomi, there were many cover stories.

Japanese people up to date with politics would know that Naoe and Isomaru had clear motive to eliminate Atsuomi. After all, another faction being founded would make competition for the party representative even tougher in the saturated Citizens' Party; a clear motive to stop Atsuomi's rise.

Ryosuke's involvement would also not be questioned considering that the Peace Party had been involved in many scandals. His reputation was infamous among the old guard, especially his distaste for the upcoming young talent. A temporary alliance to stomp out the youth wouldn't be a surprise.

The added fact that Ryosuke had killed Naoe and Isomaru would reinforce the narrative of the three being in a temporary 'alliance' to kill Atsuomi, but ultimately betraying one another, and framing eachother for Atsuomi's assassination.

So, why not target Kijima instead of Atsuomi? Even if some citizens asked such a question, the answer is simple. It's because Kijima was rumoured to have a close relationship with Miyako. Naoe, Isomaru and Ryosuke targeting Kijima would be foolish as it could invoke Prime Minister Miyako's ire, a highly unfavourable outcome.

To summarise, Atsuomi's scheme had crippled the Citizens' Party, led the Peace Party to their demise, and set the stage for the new Genesis Party to take the reins. The public would revere him as a hero and the propaganda and PSYOPs that would follow would ensure that Atsuomi's deeds would remain in their minds until the day of the election, hiding the innocent blood that had been sacrificed to lay the new foundations.

Operation: Genesis, hinged on four major factors: the Shadows of the White Room and their leader Jack with his expert deceptive skills to manipulate people [1], Atsuomi knowing Naoe, Isomaru and Ryosuke's thought processes [2], Takahashi's role as a Greek gift [3],

and Hiroshi's relentless pursuit of justice and link to NPA Security Bureau director, Hosikawa [4]. But the most important was [2]. After all, if you know how a person would respond when confronted with situation "X", then it is easy to lead them down a path you desire, and ultimately, Atsuomi was able to catch all of them in his web because he had a thorough understanding of their thought processes.

In the end, Atsuomi was victorious.

'The Genesis Party will rise to unify Japan under one vision, with me as their leader.'

Atsuomi would not let go of the advantage he had crafted. He would continue to build up the Genesis Party, simultaneously suppressing the Citizens' Party and any other parties that tried to rise from the rubble.

'However...'

There were still some other measures to take to consolidate his newfound power. Specifically, some loose ends that needed tying up.

'Takahashi and his mother have already been disposed of by the Shadows, but there are still some other cogs to work out.'

His thoughts shifted towards Hoshikawa, the Director of the NPA Security Bureau.

Ordinarily, Hoshikawa would have been immediately dealt with; however, the situation following Genesis was unique and meant that Hoshikawa still had some use.

For starters, the central government could not easily pressure Hoshikawa given that his involvement was instrumental in providing the resources to capture the foot soldiers and masterminds. If the already angry public ever caught wind that people like Hoshikawa, who had helped cleanse the nation, were being persecuted for their noble deeds, it could spark a catastrophe; the central government would want to avoid that at all costs.

The Diet, a pillar of the central government, under the pressure of the public's overwhelming support of the Genesis Party's vision, would be

forced to conduct a political investigation and audit of leading figures within the ruling Citizens' Party, leading figures like Miyako and Kijima.

As a result, neither Miyako or Kijima could afford to make any drastic moves, giving Atsuomi time to hide his involvement as a third party in the scandal, tying up any loose ends and tampering with evidence; a role that Hoshikawa would prove to be useful in.

With regards to the Peace Party—well, it's safe to say their collapse was all but guaranteed and won't be able to influence or hinder any of Atsuomi's upcoming plans.

Therefore, Hoshikawa was kept alive, for the time being at least. But now that he had completed a majority of Jack's orders, his usefulness had gradually dropped.

Which is why Jack instructed Hoshikawa to notify his office that he would be going on holiday with his family, making preparations for his eventual '**disappearance**'. Jack convinced Hoshikawa that it was merely a precaution to avoid him from being investigated, thus, keeping Hoshikawa under the delusion that everything would work out.

Given the context, no one would suspect anything amiss or question Hoshikawa's decision, after all, he had been involved in a large-scale operation to take down criminal syndicates. Going on vacation with his family to alleviate some stress wouldn't be out of the ordinary.

Which is why, although Hoshikawa's value was dwindling, he still had some use.

Hoshikawa will naturally cooperate for the sake of seeing his family again, unharmed. Even if it means betraying a close acquaintance or friend.

Thinking of the next moves he had planned prior to Genesis, Atsuomi's thoughts eventually wondered to his kin.

'Kiyotaka...'

He had been aware of what Kiyotaka had been up to during his time

at the villa.

Before going on the trip to meet the investors across Japan, the expressionless guards had told him about some very interesting developments between Kiyotaka and Hiroshi's family, particularly his close relation with their daughters.

Despite his stoic face, a sinister glint shone in Atsuomi's golden eyes. The time was ripe to execute his other plans, especially since Kiyotaka had returned to the White Room.

'He was given a 'carrot', now it's time to administer the 'stick'.

Atsuomi walked back to his desk to set up an encrypted line.

'I better contact that man; he will gather the Shadows to make preparations for the test.'

□□□□□□□ ✧ MACHINATIONS ✧ □□□□□□□

Location: Tokyo

In the suburbs of Tokyo, one family's household had regained its light with the return of the father.

It was evening. A man was seated at a couch in his two-story home's living room, absentmindedly staring off into the distance. The large TV screen, positioned a few meters away and in front of him, was powered off, casting the reflection of the man on the pitch-black monitor.

The man, Senior Inspector Hiroshi Kameda, or rather Ichinose Kameda, had reunited with his family. Thanks to the efforts made on the day of Genesis, the remnants of the criminal syndicates linked to Naoe, Isomaru and even Ryosuke had been eradicated or brought to justice, meaning that it was safe for him to return to his family.

'It wouldn't have been possible without Ayanokōji-san.'

Hiroshi was sure of this conclusion. The involvement of Naoe, Isomaru, and Ryosuke could only be guaranteed as long as Atsuomi was seen entering the SUVs, otherwise they ran the risk of them

calling off their plot. At least, that was what Hiroshi believed.

It could be true that the evidence for which Hiroshi received may have been sufficient to implicate Naoe, Isomaru, and Ryosuke, but there are significant risks to this idea.

From Hiroshi's perspective, capturing Naoe and Isomaru was the primary goal, with Ryosuke being an added party that he did not suspect but wasn't too surprised by seeing his involvement in the plot. After all, Ryosuke had the reputation for not being fond of the younger talent. But the problem was that even if Naoe, Isomaru and Ryosuke were caught, there was no guarantee that Hiroshi and his family would be safe.

It was entirely possible that if his name had ever been revealed, he ran the risk of being paid a visit by subordinates who were loyal to either Naoe, Isomaru or even Ryosuke. Thus, to prevent that, letting the plot unfold and stopping it at the last moment was the best call of action. Only by taking such a risky measure could they remove all of the cogs from the linked criminal organisations.

Additionally, one must consider that if Miyako or Kijima, who are in the ruling Citizens' Party, ever caught wind of the evidence, they run the risk of their being an elaborate coverup, given that Naoe and Isomaru were still figureheads that represented large factions in the ruling party. Thus, waiting for the plot to unfold and then exposing it would ensure a cover up would not be possible. That was Hiroshi's perception.

'Which is why, the only person I could trust to show this intel to was Ayanokōji-sensei and Hoshikawa.'

Hiroshi had met with Atsuomi at his private office to keep the meeting covert and discuss the details.

'I was surprised that he was willing to go along with my suggestion. Most politicians wouldn't put themselves at risk of harm, let alone the threat of death.'

But Atsuomi had proven to Hiroshi that he was different from the others, and even Hiroshi was moved by Atsuomi's speech that was

televised numerous times.

'It certainly seems that various businesses had been moved by his actions.'

Whilst spending time with his family, Hiroshi had noticed that a lot of large corporations had moved to support the newly founded Genesis Party, whose popularity and influence had skyrocketed at an exponential rate of growth that had never been seen before in Japan's history.

With the larger players moving towards to support the Genesis Party, Hiroshi was convinced that Atsuomi's bold declarations weren't just empty words. In fact, they had moved even those with power, assuring Hiroshi that he could continue to put his trust in Atsuomi and the newly founded Genesis Party.

'Ayanokōji-san also has a son, Kiyotaka.'

Before Genesis, after presenting the evidence to Atsuomi, Atsuomi had shown great concern about the safety of his son and ultimately decided that it would be too risky to bring him along on the trip. That sentiment deeply resonated Hiroshi's heart. After all, he had spent all this time trying to create a world for which his children, Honami and Yukari, as well as other children, could a life fruitful life without worrying about the dark forces hiding in the shadows.

Naturally, when Hiroshi had requested safety of his family, Atsuomi suggested that his family could stay at the safehouse where his son was staying. Since their children were of similar age, Hiroshi figured that their children interacting with one another could distract them from their circumstances.

He saw no reason to refuse, after all, he could trust Atsuomi since it was Atsuomi whose life was in jeopardy due to the old guard's resentment.

With that logic in mind, he figured the safest place for his family would be at Atsuomi's safehouse.

'I'm glad. Based on how much my daughters couldn't stop talking about the young boy, they clearly had a lot of fun together.'

Knowing that Honami and Yukari had had fun, despite being away from school and home, comforted the father's heart. He had seen their joyful expressions whilst in the presence of the young boy based on the photographs that had been taken during their stay at the villa.

'But it seems that they are still a little bit upset about not being able to see him again.'

Although his daughters were euphoric at their father's permanent return, he had noticed that, occasionally, the two sisters would be lost in thought, adorning an almost sad smile on their face.

'Even if it pains me, I can't arrange another meeting with them and the young boy.'

The primary reason was the deal he made with Atsuomi.

For starters, Atsuomi had told Hiroshi to keep Kiyotaka's identity a secret. Naturally, Hiroshi understood the reason behind this: it was to protect Atsuomi's son from his political enemies, who might try and harm the boy or try and leverage him.

Going against Atsuomi's request would be like spitting in the face of his own ideals.

Therefore, even if it stabbed his insides to prevent his daughters from seeing the boy, he wouldn't reveal Kiyotaka's identity as Atsuomi's son, thereby restricting contact between his daughters and the young boy.

It would also be hypocritical of Hiroshi to refuse Atsuomi's request since Hiroshi himself had asked Atsuomi not to mention his name as the source of the evidence, citing that the attention he could get, although could be positive, might invite more malicious acts towards his family.

But that's not the only reason.

In the first place, Hiroshi was not pursuing Naoe, Isomaru or even Ryosuke for personal glory. He didn't care about such things. The only thing he cared about was creating a place where his children and other children could laugh and smile without worrying about the

darkness in the world. His relentless pursuit for Justice had driven him to strive for such an ideal.

Seeing that Atsuomi had redirected the source of evidence to the National Police Agency Security Bureau, whilst still mentioning the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department's name vaguely, assured Hiroshi that Atsuomi kept his promises

Coupled with his bravery to voluntarily put himself in danger, all for the sake of the betterment of Japan, convinced Hiroshi that he could put his trust in Atsuomi.

In the end, even if Naoe and Isomaru were killed rather than behind bars, Hiroshi took solace in the fact that Ryosuke remained rotting in his cell. Thus, the wicked roots derived from Naoe, Isomaru and Ryosuke had been vanquished.

As a result, Hiroshi had come to admire Atsuomi. Like others, he saw him as the leader Japan needs to lift itself up from its decline.

'But more importantly, I've finally reunited with my family.'

His daughters are a lot more cheerful these days. Chisato is relieved and immensely happy that her beloved husband is back, permanently.

As Hiroshi was thinking this, he noticed his two mischievous daughters, tiptoeing behind him.

'Back to these antics again, huh? I guess I'll play along.'

However, before the girls could make a move on Hiroshi, his phone suddenly started ringing, stopping them in their tracks.

Glancing at his phone, the number was unlisted.

'Unlisted?'

Answering the call, he placed the phone next to his ears, glancing at his daughters with his finger in front of his lips to indicate silence.

"Hello?" Hiroshi asked.

The sound of a familiar voice entered his ears, but the tone was imbued with a palpable gravity; one that he had no heard before.

"We need to talk, now. It's urgent. Meet at the usual spot."

The call was abruptly cut, but Hiroshi was certain who that was.

'Hoshikawa.'

Hoshikawa's call had let some of his intrusive thoughts, that he had been suppressing ever since returning to his family, leak into his vulnerable mind.

'Naoe, Isomaru, and Ryosuke are undeniably behind the assassination attempt, but who sent you the evidence? Why did they send you the evidence? What was their motive?'

These questions weighed deeply on Hiroshi's shoulders. His goal had been achieved, yet it was this pivotal puzzle piece that he could not place, leaving him with a sense of frustration.

Every other event, such as Naoe and Isomaru being killed by Ryosuke to cover his tracks, fit the narrative that Hiroshi believed to be the big picture. Yet, the question of who sent him the evidence plagued his mind.

Hiroshi was a man who had always relentlessly strived for justice, which is why, prior to Genesis, he was isolated from his other colleagues, despite holding a position as a Senior Inspector in the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department.

If there was even a shroud of doubt that there was another possible perpetrator out there, he had to do something about it; that was the type of man Hiroshi was.

Which is why, following Genesis, Hiroshi had requested Hoshikawa to look into the source, and surprisingly, Hoshikawa must have shared the same sentiment because he didn't protest to Hiroshi's request.

It had been sometime since that request, so after receiving Hoshikawa's call, Hiroshi figured that he must have found something

important, considering how grave Hoshikawa's tone was.

Hiroshi trusted Hoshikawa to a certain degree, the man knew about his family situation and had helped him with changing his name from Ichinose Kameda to Hiroshi Kameda. Therefore, he had no reason to doubt Hoshikawa.

'Although he has been acting a little strangely.'

Prior to Genesis, Hoshikawa had firmly said that he wouldn't provide Hiroshi any further assistance after having helped Hiroshi change his name.

Yet, despite that firm assertion, Hoshikawa didn't show much hesitation in lending Hiroshi a hand when Hiroshi had shown him the evidence. Hiroshi expected a little resistance, but Hoshikawa hadn't shown any at the time.

'Maybe I'm overthinking this. The evidence I showed him was overwhelming, so it's not too surprising.'

"Papa, is everything okay?"

The concerned voice laced with sweetness, pulled him out of his thoughts.

Glancing down, his eldest daughter, Honami blue eyes were wide, brimming with concern and care whilst gently tugging on his shirt. Yukari was no different.

"Yes, princess. Just have to run an errand. Tell your mother for me, alright?"

They started pouting, their heads dropping in disappointment.

Even though a couple weeks had passed since Genesis and their reunion, Hiroshi understood that they didn't want to waste any time that could be spent with their father.

A warm smile graced Hiroshi's face before gently patting both his daughters' heads, comforting their disheartened expressions.

"I'll be back as soon as I can, okay? I promise."

They nodded their heads before moving upstairs, aiming to tell Chisato that Hiroshi would be out for a while.

Honami, Yukari, and Chisato couldn't know that this would be the last day they would see Hiroshi, otherwise they would have stopped the man.

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Out in the wilderness, in a secluded, rundown cabin, a large distance from any nearby local accommodation, Hoshikawa was seated on a wooden chiar, his elbows resting on the nearby dining table having just got off the phone call moments ago.

"There," Hoshikawa stated placing the phone down, "I did as you asked. Hiroshi will arrive at the location we always meet at."

The Shadows said nothing. Remaining motionless but poised to act if a threat emerged.

Their newest member, Shiba, was watching from a distance behind the other Shadows, his face hidden by the signature smiling masks the Shadows wear.

Hoshikawa felt unease take root in his stomach. The eerie smiles carved onto the assortment of the Shadows' faces exuded a predatory malice that struck fear in his heart.

His hands were slightly trembling as he got up from his chair to face the Shadows, but he knew he had to push back his fright because his family's safety depended on him.

"I've done e-everything you've told me! All tracks that would imply a third party's interference have been removed! H-Hiroshi is the only one who knows about the involvement of a third party, but he will go to the location where we usually meet up! It's isolated so you won't

have any issues!"

The other Shadows and Shiba remained silent—until one of them turned around, moving towards the cabin's door.

As soon as the Shadow opened the door, two children to quickly ran towards Hoshikawa, hugging him tightly. His wife soon followed, joining the family reunion.

""Papa!""

The atmosphere turned warmer, Hoshikawa had reunited with his family. But he did feel guilty. After all, he did set up bait to pull Hiroshi away from the safety of his family.

In a way, he had sacrificed another family's happiness for his own family's happiness.

Shiba, who was watching the heartfelt scene from a distance, let out a deep sigh, knowing what came next would bear an even larger burden on his heart and mind.

'There are no happy endings in this new world I find myself in.'

The other Shadows took powerful strides forwards, their gloved hands reaching for their suppressed firearms, tucked safely inside their dark coats.

Chk-chk

Hoshikawa's face lost all color. The man had latched onto the hope that if he did everything they asked, his family would be safe. He had seen how terrifying the Shadows were, fighting against them would be foolish.

Jack's deceptive words from the past had fooled him into believing that he and his family had a chance at escaping.

"W-Wait—"

Before Hoshikawa could even begin to protest four suppressed bullets were fired, snuffing the life out of the family.

The Shadows moved swiftly, quickly removing any traces of blood before collecting the bodies, reading them for a clean disposal.

Since Hoshikawa had announced he was going on holiday no one would suspect anything amiss. Even as time passes, the disappearance of Hoshikawa and his family would be obscured by the PSYOPs designed to keep the public's attention on the success of the Genesis Party and away from Hoshikawa's death.

That was the second objective of the current PSYOP that Atsuomi was running. Coupled with the fact that roughly more than 80,000 people go missing in Japan every year, Atsuomi's involvement would remain concealed; no one would know the truth.

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Meanwhile, Hiroshi had arrived at the designated location; an abandoned factory away from any curious eyes. Such a measure was necessary during the handover of the evidence prior to Genesis, at least, if they wanted to avoid any ears from the central government picking up their whispers and enacting a elaborate coverup.

'Hoshikawa... where are you?'

Hiroshi's instincts were clawing at his insides, telling him that there was something wrong.

'He's always here early, so where—'

His thoughts were abruptly stopped after hearing an unfamiliar voice, the words sending shivers down Hiroshi's spine.

"You know, they say curiosity killed the cat, but in your case, it may tear your world apart."

Hiroshi's body snapped to the playful voice, as a masked man stepped out of the shadows, revealing himself under the rays of moonlight passing through the glass panes on the ceiling.

"Who are you?" Hiroshi immediately asked before subtly scanning his area to plan for his eventual escape. It had become clear to him that this was a set up and that Hoshikawa had lured him here.

But the moment he asked this question more individuals with similar disguise emerged from the shadows, surrounding Hiroshi and eliminating all his escape routes.

Their leader, the first masked man Hiroshi had saw, took a few steps forward before speaking again, deliberately being cryptic.

"It doesn't matter who we are; what matters is our plan."

As he said this, the masked man reached for something in his coat before crouching down and propelling the object towards Hiroshi.

'A tablet?'

The electronic device slid across the concrete before stopping near his near Hiroshi's feat.

Seeing that he had no other options, Hiroshi picked up the tablet, the sight on the screen making his blood run cold.

'No... it can't be...'

A live feed of his house, where his family could clearly be seen in the kitchen, their figures illuminated by the ceiling lights of their home. Chisato was busy preparing dinner whilst both Honami and Yukari were helping her.

The message was clear. Hiroshi knew that if he didn't cooperate then these men would harm his family.

Hiroshi gritted his teeth, realising that he had no choice in the matter.

"What do you want?" Hiroshi growled, throwing the tablet away in anger. He wasn't the kind of man who would cower in front of criminals, especially when they were threatening his loved ones.

The masked man took a few more steps, now in arm's reach of

Hiroshi. But Hiroshi didn't make a move against the man.

His instincts were telling him that the man in front of him wasn't someone he could ever hope to beat in hand-to-hand combat, nor any other fight for that matter.

Even if Hiroshi had a weapon, his defeat was all but guaranteed; a feeling prey experiences when faced with a predator they can't hope to thwart.

"I will ask you a series of questions. You will only have a few seconds to answer each one. If you do not answer in time or I believe you to be lying..." the masked man stated clinically, dragging out his last words before his voice turned artic.

"I will torture and kill your entire family."

After hearing such a dark promise, Hiroshi had to quickly calm his bubbling anger to prevent himself from doing something stupid. He realised that he had no card in his hand to turn the tables; all his options had been eliminated with calculated precision by the shadowy figures.

What Hiroshi could not know was that Jack had received orders which clearly stipulated that his family's survival was important, implying that their existence was integral to **future plans**. But Hiroshi could not know this, and acted under the assumption that his family's lives were in severe danger.

The masked man proceeded to quiz Hiroshi about details regarding the evidence he received. Hiroshi, who didn't have anything to gain by lying nor having the time to come up with an effective lie, told the truth. After all, if this man believed him to be lying, his family would be killed. Taking such a risk was unacceptable, so Hiroshi had no choice but to truthfully answer all the questions.

Upon finishing his questioning, the masked man stood motionless, seemingly pondering Hiroshi's responses before snapping his fingers, executing various foreign gestures with hidden meanings that Hiroshi could not decipher.

The disguised subordinates began moving in the background.

"Follow me."

The masked man began walking towards the exit of the factory where a black van was waiting for them.

Hiroshi obediently followed, but his mind was racing. The questions the masked man had asked him confirmed what he had suspected.

'These people... they're the ones who sent me the evidence, and Hoshikawa is connected to them.'

Desiring answers, Hiroshi tried fishing for information before inevitably being forced into the van.

"So, I'm assuming Hoshikawa is with you? He lured me here after all."

The leader glanced at Hiroshi, deciding to humour him, "Hoshikawa, huh? In a way he was with us, but that is not the case any more."

Those eerie words caused dread to creep under his skin, but before he could organise any further thoughts darkness clouded his vision. A stabbing sensation soon followed before his body turned limp and he lost consciousness.

"Make sure he is wearing his uniform at the time of the test," the masked man announced ominously.

□□□□□□□ ✧ M A C H I N A T I O N S ✧ □□□□□□□

Location: Unknown

It had been a couple days since Kiyotaka had returned to the White Room after having travelled with his father to meet various investors across the country.

His role was mainly to display his prowess in combat, academics, problem solving and an assortment of other categories.

It wasn't a particularly pleasant experience; the gazes on him constantly evaluating his expertise and examining the results derived

from the various sample tests that were administered.

On another note, there were a few other children from prestigious families who he conversed with, giving him an opportunity to exercise his social and communication skills, which he had developed during his stay at the villa.

But the time he spent in the outside world had come to an end; it was time to return to monotonous days in the White Room, continuing to grind through the arduous conditioning and teachings the White Room had to offer—at least that's what he thought before returning 'home'.

'It seems like the new curriculum is branching out into other topics.'

Suzukake had spent a lot of sleepless nights putting together a more advanced version of the beta curriculum to continue Kiyotaka's upward trajectory in the White Room. Atsuomi had ordered him to construct a new curriculum to extrapolate Kiyotaka's growth, having it ready in time for Kiyotaka to undergo once Kiyotaka returned to the White Room.

New topics like cybersecurity, electronics, programming, and even a large assortment of engineering units or medicine units. These weren't the only ones, but they would suffice for now. Suzukake suspected that Kiyotaka would absorb the teachings rather quickly, so he decided to introduce the components of the curriculum into highly compressed chunks of information, gradually delivering them over time.

But this was not the main topic that had been consuming Kiyotaka's mind.

'Where am I being taken?'

Currently, he was being escorted by Instructor Souya to a part of the White Room that Kiyotaka had not seen before.

As always, he was carefully observing and memorising every detail of the architecture, security systems, and location of cameras, adding the new details to the existing map of the facility that resided in his

mind.

It wasn't the full picture and he had no inkling of exactly how large this facility was, but considering the fact that there were other generations of subjects, who also lived in the facility, led Kiyotaka to assume that it must be quite a large-scale building. All the more so, considering that Kiyotaka had not once seen a student from another generation; there was no way he would forget a new face with his monstrous memory.

Interestingly, Kiyotaka had noticed that they had made no efforts to block his vision to obstruct him from analysing the unfamiliar parts of the White Room. Did they deem it as an unnecessary action? Or was there another motive?

Lack of information meant that Kiyotaka could not come to a definitive conclusion. But he had no complaints given that they had so graciously provided him an opportunity to see areas of the White Room that he hadn't seen before.

But if he knew what was coming, then he would know that the information he gained would pale in comparison to the cost.

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After some time, he and instructor Souya arrived at a closed mechanical door.

Souya's lab coat swivelled in the air, his gaze now locked onto Kiyotaka.

"You will enter this room. Do not get any strange ideas and try to flee," Souya said before turning away from the door and walking away at a rather fast pace.

Not an unusual reaction given the achievements the boy had accomplished, some of which specific instructors had had front seats to witness the depth of his inhuman nature. Even if the instructors

were in a position of power, feeling uneasy in Kiyotaka's presence was an understandable reaction.

HISS

The sturdy, vacuum sealed doors decompressed, prompting Kiyotaka to follow the instructions he was given.

There was nothing to gain by not obeying the commands of the White Room, thus, he kept up the image of a loyal hound who dutifully followed every order given to him.

With graceful footwork and a straight posture that exuded a palpable confidence, he stepped into the foreign room, his eyes scanning the features of the open space.

Just like most of the rooms in the facility, the walls were white and sterile. The cool air from the industrial air conditioners tickled his skin, their soft hums filling the otherwise silent atmosphere.

For the most part, the room seemed to be quite empty—until he rounded the corridor from the doorway and was met with a strange sight, one that left the boy momentarily puzzled.

With his gaze now locked onto the corner of the room, he felt a hint of something foreign creep under his thick skin that had been hardened by the various hardships the boy had trounced since his birth. It was a strange feeling that the boy couldn't quite place. Was it wariness with a mixture of uneasiness? Kiyotaka didn't know for certain.

A man he recognised well was seated in a luxuriously, cushioned chair; an individual who Kiyotaka wasn't expecting to see so soon given that they had just recently travelled together.

'Father.'

Kiyotaka pondered what the man's motive could be but ultimately decided it would be fruitless without more information.

Instructor Souya had given him no intel to work with when he was abruptly pulled from his timetabled activities, Souya had only told

him that it was an urgent issue.

His father's presence was not the only thing that seemed out of place. There were a series of men were posted up next to Atsuomi, their faces obscured by masks with cold smiles carved onto them.

The dark vests they were wearing contrasted the usual white attire that instructors and subjects wear, making their presence in the room that much more eerie.

Amongst the masked men, one of them stood out to Kiyotaka. It wasn't just the fact that the man was the tallest of the group, but whilst the others' eyes were open and could be seen through the eye sockets on their masks, the circular openings on this man's mask were empty, implying that his eyes were closed.

Most would write off the man as careless, but Kiyotaka thought differently. This man was watching his every move, looking for any sliver of hostility from him; Kiyotaka was certain of this fact.

His senses and instincts had been rigorously honed after having lived a life of being ostracised by his peers, constantly feeling the pressure of their resentful gazes that watched his every move, waiting for an opportunity to strike him down the moment he let his guard down.

CLICK* *CLICK* *CLICK

Kiyotaka proceeded forward, his steps on the pristine flooring echoing in the vast open space, producing sharp sounds that contrasted the whooshing of the ventilation system.

Atsuomi abruptly raised his hand, prompting Kiyotaka to cease his approach, stopping a few meters away from where Atsuomi was seated.

But neither Atsuomi or the entourage behind him made a single sound. They remained stationary, staring holes into the boy. It was strange. As far as Kiyotaka was concerned, Atsuomi always cut to the chase; Atsuomi's time was far too precious to waste on idle silences.

Yet, this quietness persisted—until Kiyotaka heard rustling sounds behind him.

A conscious man in police uniform, was being dragged across the pristine floor. His mouth was gagged, and limbs were zip tied, preventing all forms of resistance.

Kiyotaka's eyes quickly reflected one of recognition as the bound man inched closer, the details of his face becoming more apparent.

'That's Honami's father...'

During his stay at the villa, Honami and Yukari had always talked about their father, even showing photos of the man to him. They told him that their father, Ichinose Kameda, was away from home because of "very important work" and that he worked in law enforcement. When Kiyotaka asked Chisato, she was quite vague with the details, however, he did manage to learn that he was a Senior Inspector for the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department.

'But the pin on his uniform clearly states something else.'

On his shirt pocket, the name engraved on the tag clearly read "Hiroshi Kameda".

Kiyotaka was certain that this man, "Hiroshi Kameda", had the same face as Honami's father, Ichinose Kameda. The fact that he was going by a different name suggested Hiroshi was involved in covert work, which would fit the narrative of "very important work" and his occupation as a Senior Inspector for the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department. Hiroshi's family having to stay in an isolated area for safekeeping implied that they were in danger or under the threat of harm, likely due to Hiroshi's involvement in "very important work".

'Perhaps he dug too far into my father's activities...'

Kiyotaka didn't know a lot about his father's reach during his stay at the villa. The villa he stayed at was fairly isolated from civilisation. With only board games, books, Hiroshi's family, and the wilderness to occupy him, obtaining sensitive information was very difficult.

However, after having gone on the trip to visit investors across the country, he noticed that a lot of them had tried to get in his father's good graces, implying that his father possessed a significant degree of

influence. That and the mention of the newly founded "Genesis Party", which would quote-on-quote "rise to become the dominant political party in Japan" and "be the ruling party after winning the next election with Ayanokōji-sensei as the Prime Minister".

There was other useful information, like the large scandal involving the ruling and opposition parties, but those two statements stood out the most to Kiyotaka. Given that none of the prestigious families attending the meetups had contested the bold assertions, at least not openly as far as Kiyotaka was aware, but instead agreed with the sentiments implied that Atsuomi becoming the Prime Minister was an inevitable outcome.

If that were the case, then Atsuomi would soon be in a position of a lot of power and wouldn't want anything to jeopardise his ascension to Prime Minister of Japan. With that assessment in mind, Kiyotaka was sure that the White Room was not a facility that Atsuomi would want discovered, at least until Atsuomi was Prime Minister and had more flexibility and resources at his disposal.

Kiyotaka had spent a large portion of his time interacting with Honami and Yukari, so he had a decent understanding of how normal people behaved, as well as how children are educated in the outside world. If the teaching methods employed by the White Room were ever released to the public, it would be a national—no, an international scale atrocity.

Coupled with the fact that the White Room rigorously makes efforts to control information—going as far as incapacitating him during his departure from the White Room, thus, stopping him from seeing the real-world topography of what lies outside the White Room and thereby effectively masking the facility's location.

Hence, Kiyotaka was confident that Atsuomi would not want the White Room's location exposed before becoming Prime Minister.

'With those facts in mind, if Honami's father is here, then that can only mean one thing.'

The foreign sentiments, that had crept inside his body earlier on, started to make sense. His suspicions grew regarding what he had to

do, but somewhere deep down he hoped it not to be the case.

"Kiyotaka."

His father's sharp voice cut through Kiyotaka's thoughts and captured his attention, forcing him to confront Atsuomi's fierce golden gaze that he was sure many people had fallen victim to.

Maintaining his usual stoic expression and straight posture, he uttered a response void of emotion, projecting nothing but obedience and indifference; the charade of a perfect soldier.

"Yes, sir."

Atsuomi didn't continue immediately, instead he took the chance to glance at Hiroshi, whose restrained body had begun trembling as a result of the turbulent feelings that were coursing through his body. A mixture of anger, betrayal, and fear could be seen swirling in his once unshakeable blue eyes, that were now darting back in forth in fury but also terror.

There was no doubt that Hiroshi had come to the conclusion that Atsuomi was the mastermind all along; the one who had orchestrated the downfall of Naoe, Isomaru and Ryosuke. Ultimately, it was Atsuomi who had planned the collection of evidence and its transmission to his apartment.

How Atsuomi obtained the evidence was something Hiroshi could not know, but at the very least, Hiroshi was sure that Atsuomi was the puppet master. He could not know how far Atsuomi's machinations scaled back, but he knew one thing for certain.

'No one will ever question it...'

Hiroshi realised this terrifying conclusion. After all, from the public's perspective, Atsuomi was the hero of the nation; the man who had ushered a new era into Japan's history. The underdog who stood against the seniority system and put his life on the line for the sake of the country.

No one would know about the blood of innocents that had been spilled in the shadows. The blood that laid the foundation for Japan's

rebirth.

Hiroshi was in complete anguish at this relevation, his mind spiralling in numerous directions, clouded with dark thoughts. The strange white room he found himself in and the familiar young boy, Kiyotaka, wearing a clad white gown, were just more questions that added to the growing chaos that was wreaking havoc on his now fragile sanity.

"This man, Hiroshi Kameda, is the father of the family who you had been staying with," Atsuomi began with a cold tone before shifting his eyes to Kiyotaka, who remained completely motionless, "and he is someone who knows too much. A man who stuck his nose where it doesn't belong."

Atsuomi paused his spiel, preparing to give a task that would shake Kiyotaka to his core.

"Kiyotaka, prove your loyalty and kill this man. If you do not, you will share his grave."

Those words, that had come out of his father's mouth, were the ones Kiyotaka's did not want to hear.

The implications of the order brought upon a feeling that Kiyotaka didn't want to experience again.

It triggered a memory that he had suppressed and avoiding confronting for years, but his father's command had reopened that old wound, the memory of that **fateful day**.

It was a few years ago. Kiyotaka, Yuki and some other children were still in the curriculum but the same could not be said for numerous subjects from the past who had disappeared over the years, never to be seen again. Such a fate was equivalent to death in Kiyotaka's eyes.

Just like any other day, Kiyotaka underwent his timetabled activities. But there was a change. Something which even the head instructors like Suzukake had not foreseen.

The order had come from the top, instructions for which Suzukake could not decline, even if he, as a researcher, wanted to observe and

understand how Yuki was able to express such intense emotions in the fourth-generation environment, he could not disobey his direct superior's orders.

At the time, Kiyotaka was still showing growth that went above the instructors' predictions. On the other hand, Yuki had started falling behind, approaching her limit but based on Suzukake's analysis, she still had some time left

But that was for naught because what was instructed was simple: Yuki must be **forcibly removed** from the beta curriculum.

The reason, for such an order was shrouded in mystery; a reason that only the one at the top could know: the man known as Ayanokōji Atsuomi.

But it was the secondary condition to the order which twisted the knife that had delivered the stabbing news.

"K-Kiyotaka! I d-don't want to fight you!" Yuki exclaimed with tears streaming down her face and body trembling in fear whilst kneeling on the floor, clawing at his white gown.

But the terror she was feeling was not one born from her acknowledgement of her inevitable defeat to the young boy, rather what came afterwards: the fate of disappearing like the others.

However, the biggest reason behind her tears was that she would never be able to see Kiyotaka ever again.

"I want to s-stay with you! I-I don't want to leave you all alone in this

terrible p-place!" Yuki continued, crying out in despair at the cruelty of their scenario.

Meanwhile, from the perspective of the White Room staff, who observed the two subjects from a distance through the one-way reinforced glass, Kiyotaka looked like a monster staring down at his prey with an apathetic expression, ready to devour her like a predator should.

They had seen how attached Yuki was to Kiyotaka, and had initially thought there was a chance the boy felt the same way, even if he seemed indifferent to her presence.

After all, throughout their education, following completion of isolation training, she was the only person who ever talked to him in the White Room.

Yet, the scene they watched convinced them that that wasn't the case.

Their eyes witnessed the boy remain completely silent, offering no words of comfort nor showing any changes in his facial expression. He just silently gazed upon a weakling whose fate was always to become victim to the strong—at least, that was their assessment of the situation.

But that analysis was wrong. Even if his face was as blank as the imposing white walls surrounding them, only Yuki could see the conflict in his golden eyes, the true thoughts behind that emotionless façade he presented to the world.

Kiyotaka had done something taboo in the White Room environment. Perhaps, Yuki's presence by his side, when everyone else had turned against him, had made the boy, unknowingly, feel like he wasn't alone. Her unwavering conviction and goodwill in remaining by his side when everyone had called him a monster, when Kiyotaka was nothing but cold and indifferent to her, and even when it put her own life in danger, had moved him in ways that he couldn't understand.

"I know there is good in you, Kiyotaka."

Those were the words she had said to him in the past without hesitation, a sentiment he couldn't understand.

Why did she believe such a thing even when he thought of himself as a monster, just like everyone claimed he was? What could she see in him that he didn't?

But it was those very words and Yuki's unwavering support that allowed Yuki to make her way into Kiyotaka's heart, and as a result, a thin thread-like connection formed between the two young souls.

Was this connection, that even Kiyotaka wasn't consciously aware of, the reason for why his rate of growth wasn't as explosive before her departure? To prolong their time together in the curriculum? Did his subconscious mind desire her presence next to his side and adjust his output accordingly?

But that didn't matter now because in the White Room, such a fragile bond between the two young souls could not flourish into something beautiful.

In this moment, Kiyotaka knew that and understood that it was a weakness that would lead to his demise if he did not sever it. He knew what had to be done if he wanted to ensure his survival, if he wanted to be safe. To be the one destined to take the fourth-generation throne that could only be crowned to one head.

So why? Why, despite those assertions, did he feel hesitation in this critical moment?

The boy knew the White Room's orders were absolute; the consequences of disobedience were severe. He had witnessed fools who had rebelled before him suffer horrendous fates.

Kiyotaka vowed that he would not follow their example. There was nothing to gain by doing such a thing. The only thing one could do in the White Room environment was adapt and absorb the teachings because there was no other choice.

Hence, Kiyotaka embraced that notion and used the White Room to satisfy his intellectual curiosity, devoting everything he had to ensure

he survived and did not disappear; anything, or anyone who hindered that would have to be dealt with.

That mindset is why he had mercilessly cut down countless people in the past. The individuals who had tried to suppress him served as stepping stones to the peak; hesitation was never a factor he had to deal with when he carried out his ruthless acts.

Yet, as he gazed into Yuki's tearful eyes...

'What is this feeling?'

An unknown variable: a foreign emotion that couldn't be placed caused him an indescribable searing pain that originated from the inside of his soul. Something that could not be understood with the White Room's teachings.

But Kiyotaka knew one thing for certain—he didn't like it. The more he pondered the feeling the more it threatened to consume him.

'If I don't obey... my fate will be the same.'

His instincts, that had brought him thus far, violently screamed at him, telling him that such an ending could not—no, *must* not be the final page in his story. He had to climb to the top, no matter what he had to sacrifice.

So, he made the difficult 'choice': he cut her down and, in the process, chipped away at his own heart, feeling an ache that gripped his insides on a magnitude he hadn't felt before.

That was the day he lost a part of himself that may not be able to be recovered, marking the instant where his young heart had been broken.

That was the price he had paid to reach the top of the insurmountable mountain that was the demonic fourth generation—the price he paid to carry the hefty weight that came with obtaining the title:

The Masterpiece of the White Room.

The memory ended there.

But now in the present, as Kiyotaka stands at the top of that lonely mountain, once again, dark forces threatened to drag him down from his rightful throne.

Kiyotaka had already given away a part of himself to reach the top, but Atsuomi's order required him to sacrifice more if he wanted to remain at the pinnacle.

Honami's father must die for Kiyotaka to survive; to not disappear.

In the past, he had not blinked an eye when he drove others to their destruction.

Yuki was an exception; one that Kiyotaka believed to be the only one.

But that belief was wrong, as a similar gnawing feeling, that he had felt on that fateful day, resurfaced again.

'Why?'

Kiyotaka had never even met the man up until this point. Hiroshi was but a stranger to Kiyotaka, a man he should have no issues dealing with. Killing him without a weapon would be a cake walk even if Hiroshi was not tied up.

Yet, as Kiyotaka stared into his Hiroshi's irises, he saw something strange. They were no longer quivering in fear, anger or resentment, rather, radiating a calm resignation, as if he had come to terms with his inevitable death. But that wasn't the biggest detail that left Kiyotaka puzzled.

'Why are you looking at me like that?'

There was an unmistakable look of understanding but also care embedded deep in his ocean blue eyes; an act to try and comfort the young child.

It was as if Hiroshi could see through Kiyotaka; the struggle that laid beyond his eyes, the hardships he had endured and the innocence that he had lost.

Even if Kiyotaka had been threatened with death, shouldn't Hiroshi resent him? Human beings were generally selfish in desperate times, at least, that was what Kiyotaka believed, having lived in the White Room since birth.

After all, in the past, the fourth-generation subjects had tried to take Kiyotaka's life multiple times, attempting to eliminate competition in the name of self-preservation.

Yet, just like Yuki had, Hiroshi left Kiyotaka questioning his perception, showing him that even when faced with dire circumstances, human beings could exhibit compassion, care and empathy, albeit at a small scale in this circumstance.

That compassion reminded him of Hiroshi's family: Honami, Yukari and Chisato. A family that had shown him nothing but goodwill during his stay at the villa. They didn't know and perhaps Kiyotaka hadn't realised until this point, the impact for which they had had on him.

Their warmth had given him a moment of solace, filling the gap in his heart that Yuki's departure had left, providing him a sense of comfort that he hadn't realised how much his body craved, even if it was for a fleeting moment.

Kiyotaka knew just how important this man, Hiroshi, was to them. He had seen the smiles that they carried when they talked about Hiroshi but also their hidden sorrow regarding Hiroshi's absence, even if they each expressed it in different ways.

'So why does the thought of killing this man bring that similar feeling from that day?'

Initially, his perception of Honami, Yukari, and Chisato were people who he could use to enhance his abilities, specifically his social skills, and gain more knowledge of the wider world. Anything other than that was inconsequential to him.

'If that were true then why am I full of doubt?

Ever since he was born, the only thing that mattered to him was

survival but that creed had inevitably brought others suffering; people he had, unknowingly, opened his heart to.

'But... there is no other choice.'

There was a part of him that wished for that not to be the case and another part that realised that that was impossible.

'Live with this man's innocent blood on my hands or die.'

Whether the threat of Kiyotaka's death was a bluff or not could not easily be concluded. Kiyotaka had witnessed the fate of the first-generation subjects, hounds who had bit the hand of their master and reaped the consequences. Their disregard for authority had led them to their demise.

Kiyotaka was of value to the White Room because he produced significant results but also because he had never disobeyed an order. If he started rebelling now, would his value plummet? That consideration introduced a very large risk. He could not say for certain that his life was of utmost importance to the White Room facility, at least after gathering new information during his excursion.

This was because after observing the interactions between Atsuomi and the prominent investors during the trip, Kiyotaka was certain that Atsuomi's influence was vast. In other words, his reach went far beyond just the walls of the White Room. Additionally, the whispers of Atsuomi being in line to be the next person to ascend as Japan's Prime Minister convinced Kiyotaka that Atsuomi's ambitions went far beyond just the White Room, ambitions that he could not grasp for certain yet.

That fact alone made it life threatening for Kiyotaka to oppose Atsuomi's will, especially since his existence was not publicly known to the world.

The handful who did know were primarily investors that wholeheartedly supported Atsuomi and had signed under a strict NDA. Therefore, staging an accident for Kiyotaka's death wouldn't be difficult with the resources the White Room had at its disposal.

Of course, Kiyotaka didn't know all these details, but the lack of information made him more cautious, which is why, based on everything he did know, he concluded it wouldn't be difficult to cover up his existence.

Fighting was also not an option. He did not know what weapons the masked men were hiding and even though Kiyotaka had been training in increasingly disadvantageous positions, the current situation was out of the question.

A front on assault, with no weapon, against men whose skillset he did not know, whose reach was further than his, and in an unfamiliar room that could house hidden defence systems that could immediately incapacitate him—it was an impossibility. There were too many unknowns that couldn't be taken out of the situation.

'Not only that, but if I don't kill this man, then...'

The variable of 'trust' that he had been cultivating all this time would be broken. Up to this point, he had maintained the façade of a piece on a chessboard that was under the White Room's control. If he wanted to evolve and be a piece that crossed the board to become a player, that variable of 'trust' would be necessary at some point in the future.

Keeping that 'trust' intact would be critical if he ever wanted the chance to achieve the dream the small, childlike part of himself desired, but had suppressed in favour of his survival.

'But still... why do I have to feel this again?'

Despite all these logical reasons to kill Hiroshi, why did it feel like his insides were bleeding? Emotions shouldn't be in the equation; that sentiment had been drilled into his brain and Kiyotaka had embraced that philosophy. Yet, they had forced their way into him during his analysis, meddling with his judgement.

"I'm waiting, Kiyotaka."

Atsuomi's cold voice snapped Kiyotaka out of his turbulent thoughts. It hadn't been long since Atsuomi had issued his ultimatum due to how quickly Kiyotaka can process and understand information, but every second he hesitated from now onwards would reveal more intel about his inner workings to Atsuomi.

'This man will likely die regardless of my choice; this is nothing but a test of my loyalty.'

Kiyotaka reasoned with himself, telling himself that this man's fate was already sealed, trying to ease the feelings deep within that threatened to tear his insides apart.

He had sacrificed so much to come this far; he could not let what he had given up be lost in vain.

So, even if he felt a searing pain on the inside, Kiyotaka made his 'choice' and followed the orders he was given, just like he had on the fateful day, responding with his signature monotone voice and blank expression to mask the truth of his feelings.

"Understood, sir," he said, before proceeding to mount Hiroshi's immobilised body, preparing his assault.

Every blow he delivered to Hiroshi's vital points, like the throat to collapse the trachea, chipped away at his already broken heart.

Would he ever be whole again? Did he even deserve such a thing?

Those were the questions that entered his mind as he drove Hiroshi towards his early death.

But as he continued battering Hiroshi, images of the memories he had made with his family flicked through his head, plunging his insides into a frenzy of anguish.

The memories of one particular girl from that memory soon consumed his mind. Her affectionate smile, her care and her kindness.

What would *she* think if *she* knew the truth? If *she* saw what he really was? Would *her* eyes, that always exuded goodwill, gaze at him with hatred and terror after seeing him be the monster he believed himself to be?

The numerous answers to those questions haunted Kiyotaka as he witnessed the light in Hiroshi's eyes slowly dwindle away; a light that had been snuffed out by his own hands.

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...

Time had passed.

Kiyotaka lifted himself up with great difficulty, the weight of his legacy as the White Room's Masterpiece now feeling heavier.

He glanced at his bloodied knuckles momentarily, before focusing his attention on Atsuomi.

Atsuomi, with a look of satisfaction on his face, got up from his seat, taking a few steps away from Hiroshi's lifeless body, uttering a warning to Kiyotaka before continuing his efforts to leave the room.

"Do not forget this day, Kiyotaka. Those who fly too close to the sun will suffer the same fate."

Atsuomi's footsteps faded in the distance, but Kiyotaka remained standing, his golden eyes hollower than they had ever been.

It was Atsuomi's machinations that had led to this event; the day that reminded Kiyotaka that everything came with a cost.

In the past he had carved out a piece of his heart as penance to complete the fourth-generation curriculum.

And now, after he had taken the life of an innocent man, a man who's family had shown him nothing but compassion, he realised the true price of freedom that the childlike part of himself seeks.

The toll was great, one that he had paid with his own humanity, giving away the already small pieces of himself that made him human.

There was no doubt that this dark day marked the instant where Kiyotaka had unknowingly taken a step into the abyss; a vast pit void of colour that threatened to swallow him whole if he did not tread carefully.

So, will he fall in line with his father's wishes? Or will he continue to

reach out to the vastness of the sky, searching for his freedom even if it costs him **everything?**

Icarus did not heed Daedalus' warning and met his end.

Would Kiyotaka follow the same fate? Or would his wings, forged from the blood of the mountain of corpses he stood on, remain strong and not melt under the heat of the sun?

Only time would tell.

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A/N: Before discussing anything else, I would like to express my thanks to everyone who has made it this far.

I really do appreciate all the comments posted on the chapters even if I haven't responded to all of them. The support the story has received is overwhelming.

I'm very new to writing so mistakes are inevitable, especially with spelling, punctuation and grammar. Sometimes, even when I proofread, I miss mistakes. So, I'll probably go fix them up at some point.

I tried to keep the writing as consistent as possible, keeping track of all the plot points introduced thus far, especially with this chapter when writing the first scene. I hope the explanation made sense, I know it was long and convoluted but I did my best to summarise all the events leading up to Genesis.

On another note, this may have been a controversial way to end Volume 0, and I know Volume 0 was very long (~95000 words). But I tried my best to make Volume 0 as interesting as possible because I really wanted to take the time to flesh out the characters and build the story's world in preparation for future arcs.

I'll be going on holiday, so I won't be able to write for some time, which means that updates won't be as frequent. That will likely be the case even when I return since I will have personal obligations to carry out as well with a new semester starting.

But this story will continue and any updates on the status of the story will be provided on my profile.

With that final but long message, I sincerely hope to see you all once the next volume starts.

Have a nice day!

SS: Beyond the Pages

Year: 2014

Location: Imperial Palace, Tokyo

The sun had begun its descent, casting dwindling rays of light that painted the Imperial Palace in a vibrant, golden-orange hue.

But deep within it's tall walls, beyond the carefully pruned hedges of vegetation in the Imperial Gardens, past the ordered rows of Japanese maple trees and Sakura trees, a young girl sat in a quiet solitude, perched next to her bedside window with a book on her lap.

Her room was decorated with a vastness of luxuries, but also an exorbitant number of books, filling the otherwise clean and pristine room with a scent of old paper and polished wood.

Looking away from the setting sun, she continued reading her book, tucking a loose strand of her long, wavy, silver hair, that extended just past the midsection of her back, behind her ear.

With gentle movements, she carefully turned the pages. Her innocent yet perceptive light-purplish eyes radiating with excitement whilst reading a new fictitious mystery novel—a genre that always left her heart racing in wonder, pondering the deeper meaning behind the author's words conveyed through the various characters in the story.

To those who had never met the young girl, she was a mystery. A young maiden who had imperial blood coursing through her veins.

Her name and face remained hidden from the world, but her existence as the concealed Imperial Princess made her an enigma to the public.

But to the rare few who truly knew the girl, they understood that

beneath her distinct layers of beauty, innocence and quiet grace, there lay buried an ever-curious mind—a mind that wondered about the outside world that was described in the countless number of books she had read.

To her, the novels she loved reading were not just mere entertainment, they were a window into a world she had never touched. A world beyond the palace walls with so many possibilities that she had yet to see.

Lifting her gaze from the pages, she peered out of her bedside window before allowing a soft exhale to escape her rosy lips.

"Do you ever wonder," she murmured to no one in particular, "what it's like to walk among the people? To truly see the world? To make friends and connections?"

A gentle breeze suddenly rustled the curtains, as if the wind itself had come to listen to her musings, physically acknowledging her desires buried deep within her heart. The gesture made her smile faintly, closing her book with a soft thud.

One day, the young girl would step beyond the confines of the palace. Not as a princess, but as a girl who longed to know the realities of the world and live a normal life under the name:

Shiina Hiyori.

Whether that would spell her undoing remained to be seen.

After all, the world was a vast place, and not all who lurked within it had her best interests at heart.

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A/N:

Here's a little teaser into the next volume of this fanfic! I appreciate all of your patience and support as I work on the upcoming chapters. For more details on progress, feel free to check the latest announcement out on my profile.

On another note, just as a quick historical fact, the Imperial Family in Japan does NOT have a shared family name. In other words, you can't identify a member of the Imperial Family by just their last name alone. Just a little piece of information for those interested in the details behind the setting.

Hope you all enjoyed the sneak peak. Feel free to leave a comment—I love reading your thoughts.

V1 - Chapter 1: Hidden Agendas

Location: National Diet Building, Tokyo

Timeline: 2014

It was just a few minutes past noon.

It had been five years since the day of Genesis and the political landscape of Japan was severely different than it had been then.

The scheduled *extraordinary* Diet session was ready to commence, albeit slightly later than it should have been.

Which is why the horse-shoe seating arrangement of the grand chamber of the National Diet building was filled with tentative whispers and hushed voices, as various politicians began growing restless with the delay in the Diet session that was scheduled to start at noon on the dot.

CLING* *CLING* *CLING

"Order! Order! I demand order!"

A powerful yet relatively youthful voice, embedded with a palpable authority, immediately silenced the disgruntled voices amongst the crowd of Diet members.

The man, also known as the Speaker—who is in charge of overseeing the Diet session—upon witnessing the immediate silence and seeing everyone's attention now focused on him, stopped ringing the bell and adjusted his tie situated on his impeccably tailored suit before commencing the Diet session.

"With the President of the **House of Councillors** having arrived, I will now officially commence the continuation of the extraordinary

Diet session of the Year 2014, as the Speaker of the **House of Representatives**."

"The motion for today's debate continues the discussion of the amendment of **Article 9** from the **Constitution**, a Constitution that has remained unchanged since it had come into effect back in 1947. The floor is now open."

With graceful steps against the polished, wooden floor, the relatively youthful Speaker took his seat on the elevated platform at the front of the chamber.

A firm voice charged with conviction quickly emerged from the left-hand side of the horse-shoe shaped seating plan, as a formally dressed older individual stood up from his seat to address the chamber.

"There is no further debate to be had Mister Speaker. The House of Councillors from the **Civic Party** continues to firmly oppose any amendment to Article 9, a sentiment that is even shared among members of the ruling, **Genesis Party**."

Numerous voices from the left-hand side, and even some from the right hand-side of the chamber, hummed in agreement before quietening down to properly hear the standing man's following words.

"Japan has firmly kept its stance on avoiding war and only focussing on defence for decades. It is that act of pacifism that has preserved our country's culture thus far. To throw away that promise we made all those years ago would mark the beginning of our end! Have we already forgotten the lessons of the past?"

His finals words were imbued with a great degree of anger, as if the man could not believe that a debate was needed to decide whether Japan needed to amend Article 9 of the Constitution.

Before the older man could continue, a sharp looking middle-aged man, with golden hair and cunning blue eyes, abruptly cut of the man's speech, his voice laced with venom and mockery as a small smirk coloured his otherwise rather handsome face.

"Are we really going to listen to the mumblings of an old man who is the reason why this country has plummeted so far? **Councillor Miyako**, your **immigration policies** you enacted after Genesis were downright malicious and not at all a reflection of what the Japanese people wanted; I dare say perhaps even a violation of the Constitution."

The older man's face immediately soured, hearing those same devilish words spoken with a daunting charisma. The man who had cut him off had always made sure to constantly remind him of his past failures.

'Nagumo Katsuyuki, that conniving defence and weapons contractor, always using the gamble I made in the past against me.'

Before Miyako—formerly known as Prime Minister Miyako—could utter a response to House of Representatives Diet member Katsuyki's carefully selected words, another voice emerged from the horse-shoe shaped stands, speaking defiantly against Katsuyuki's provocative statement.

"And you Nagumo? You're just pushing to make an amendment to Article 9 for your own selfish interests. I'm sure increasing our focus on active militarisation and shifting away from our pacifistic roots would be beneficial for your '*business*'."

Another middle-aged man, with short, dark black hair, piercing ruby eyes, and refined glasses that gleamed under the ceiling lights, made his appearance, adorning a classic suit and tie that only added to the man's elegance.

Seeing a familiar face resembling his old rival, Katsuyuki's smirk curved wider in amusement before renewing his assault on Miyako, cleverly redirecting the chamber's attention to the past failures of the Civic Party and away from his own motives.

"Ah, Horikita. We're in the same political party, yet you always seem to try and paint me as the villain. Surely, even you can also see that Miyako's easing of immigration had ultimately backfired on him and cost the nation greatly. The crime rates—that our reverent **Prime Minister** was responsible for bringing to an all-time low during

Genesis—have **skyrocketed** with the policies from the past enacted by former Prime Minister Miyako and his Cabinet ministers before his term ended."

Katsuyuki's words silenced the man known as Horikita Ryouma momentarily. Ryouma agreed with Katsuyuki's claim that Miyako's immigration policies were a gamble that ultimately backfired on the Civic Party. However, that did not mean he was in favour of amending Article 9 of the Constitution, especially since he was a member of the Genesis Party and a key figure part of the **anti-amendment** faction—a faction within the Genesis Party that opposed the amendment of Article 9.

"Even so, Miyako's words ring true. Is increasing our military power, moving away from self-defence, and ruining the decades of peace we have cultivated, truly what the Japanese people want?"

Various people within the stands voiced their agreement of Horikita's statement, strangely, there was more support than Katsuyuki had initially expected.

However, Katsuyuki remained calm and didn't falter in the face of substantial resistance, continuing to sow doubt in the Diet members' minds with his disarming words.

"Perhaps not yet. But let me remind you that **Iwakura Genjirou**, the previous Director of the JSDF, was caught committing heinous crimes of **national espionage** and the **illegal sale of arms and explosives**. That military equipment, if in the wrong hands, could be a threat to our national security. Not only that, but the increase in criminal activity and **hate crimes** against Japanese nationals, which local law enforcement are unable to handle before tragedy strikes, is only getting worse. So, rather than self-defence tactics, having the option of taking the initiative would save more lives, no?"

Ryouma bit his tongue. He couldn't deny the fact that the now missing military-grade weaponry could pose a significant threat to national security, and the fact that the national crime rate was at an all-time high was also a significant issue.

But he continued to voice his protests, instinctively feeling that

moving away from a pacifistic military would be the start of an authoritarian regime, one that compromised his own belief in upholding democracy. After all, he firmly believed that sovereignty must remain with the people, one of the key principles of the Constitution.

"What you say is true, but is there a need for us to use the government's money to increase our military power all for the sake of national security? We already have the Public Security Intelligence Agency to uphold Japan's national security, and even if circumstances truly get dire, our allies can offer military aid if required. That money can be better used elsewhere to support and encourage the growth of the country's youth. Isn't that the basis for which the Genesis Party was founded on?"

Ryouma made a decent attempt to counter Katsuyuki's argument, causing some sway in the chamber as various murmurs agreed with his words. After all, he wasn't wrong in the assertion that their allies could send military aid to Japan, providing support during a crisis.

But this did not deter Katsuyuki, as his condescending smirk morphed into a sneer, revealing the palpable malice that had been brewing beneath his charming façade. He proceeded to deliver a viscous attack to Ryouma and his followers like a serpent would to its prey.

"For starters, the 'Public Security Intelligence Agency'? The same intelligence agency that not only failed to identify the buyers, but has also failed to locate the missing military grade equipment? The same intelligence agency that, with all its resources at its disposal, has not brought forward anything meaningful since the incident?"

But Katsuyuki did not stop there, he went onto deliver a critical blow before Ryouma could even muster a rebuttal.

"Also, after all the trouble the influx of **foreigners** have brought to our country, are you really suggesting that we should increase our dependence on foreign influence? Is that really what's best for Japan and our party's goal of striving for political independence? Is that how we as members of the ruling Genesis Party "will make Japan great again"? Tell me, Horikita, are you actually a Japanese citizen part of the proud Genesis Party, or someone else's *shill*?"

Although Katsuyuki's words were certainly provocative and his last statement was unnecessary and slanderous, there was a great deal of truth in his prior statements, which is why many other voices emerged in the stands in support of Katsuyuki's argument. After all, the Genesis Party was primarily nationalistic, meaning they valued Japan's political independence and sovereignty.

Ryouma remained silent. It was clear he was losing the argument and that Katsuyuki held the advantage in the debate.

But just as Ryouma thought he was going to lose the debate, various voices from the stands emerged to defend him, leaving Katsuyuki stupefied.

However, it wasn't the fact that Katsuyuki was facing resistance that troubled him. It was the fact that there were far more voices from the Genesis Party that were firmly resisting the motion to amend Article 9 than he had initially expected.

*'What? Even if Miyako's immigration policy was a clever ploy to **divide** the Genesis Party, it ultimately backfired on him. I was certain that most of the Diet members would still agree with me.'*

In his calculations, Katsuyuki had even factored in the chunk of the younger politicians within the Genesis Party who had more idealistic visions and stood against the amendment of Article 9, aligning themselves with the **anti-amendment** faction.

Yet, even then, this was not the case. It was clear that this debate had been jeopardised with the chamber having been plunged into a frenzy, meaning the discussion of Article 9's amendment would have to continue in another Diet proceeding.

Seeing the maddening chaos, the Speaker of the House of Representatives quickly got up and begun ringing the bell, attempting to soothe the turbulent atmosphere into something more civilised.

CLING* *CLING* *CLING

"Order! Order! I demand order!"

But the chaos did not stop. In the end, the Diet hearing was cut short,

meaning the debate of whether Article 9 should be amended would continue, likely for the foreseeable future—well, that's ***if*** the status quo is maintained.

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An older individual walked out of the National Diet building, exhaling deeply as he examined the well-maintained greenery that surrounded the parliamentary building.

It provided him a fleeting moment of solace; a second of peace that significantly contrasted the heated debate that had occurred just moments ago regarding the amendment of Article 9 of the Constitution.

Walking towards a nearby bench, the older man took a seat before pulling out a cigarette and a lighter, inhaling the tobacco substance to ease his body at the future expense of his health, peacefully examining the scenery.

Puffs of smoke escaped his mouth, relieving his stress briefly before his mind wandered towards the chaos that had ensued in the National Diet building.

'It's been like this for a while. Ultimately, the Diet cannot reach a decision to reject or accept the motion of amending Article 9. The Cabinet had been forced to call upon an extraordinary Diet session to continue the debate.'

Japan's political system, like any other political system, can be difficult to understand. Therefore, it is best to consider the big picture, starting right from understanding how the whole country, Japan, operates.

To do that it would be best to begin right from the foundations that form the basis of the structure of Japan's system of governance: *the Japanese Constitution.*

The Japanese Constitution, which is composed of 11 chapters and 103 articles, is what you could consider a book that outlines the "supreme laws" that the country, Japan, including all people in power

and the citizens, must abide by. A simple analogy would be to compare the Japanese Constitution to the commandments of the Bible, which stipulate what one can and cannot do.

Now, before World War II, the Japanese Constitution, also known as the "Meiji Constitution", outlined that power was broadly centralised under the *Emperor*, granting him significant authority over Japan's governance.

However, following the events of World War II, the Meiji Constitution was torn apart, and a new Japanese Constitution was birthed, a Constitution that would go onto be known as the "Post-war Constitution" and is still what is used in Japan to the present day.

The Post-war Constitution was deliberately designed to decentralize power, shifting authority from the Emperor to a democratic government in an effort to prevent the tragedies of war from recurring in Japan.

As a result, the Emperor and the Imperial Family's political power, in accordance with Article 1 and 5, from Chapter I: The Emperor, of the Post-War Constitution, was stripped away, leaving them as a figure head with no sway in matters of governance of Japan.

Article 1: *The Emperor shall be the symbol of the State and of the unity of the People, deriving his position from the will of the people with whom resides sovereign power.*

Article 5: *The Emperor shall perform only such acts in matters of state as are provided for in this Constitution and he shall not have powers related to government.*

However, although the Emperor has no political power, he and the Imperial Family, as stated in Article 1, are still the "symbol of the State" and represent "the unity of the People". Therefore, they still hold a significant degree of influence in Japan even after World War II; influence that can be used to serve one's interests if correctly wielded.

Nevertheless, the Imperial Family doesn't have political power, thus, instead of authority being in the hands of the Emperor, political

power was divided into different branches of the *central government*; the 'new' group responsible for governing the country, Japan.

Now, with regards to *Article 9*, for a direct quote, Article 9 from Chapter II: Renunciation of War of the Constitution states: *Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognised.*

In simpler terms, Japan was no longer allowed to maintain active land, sea and air forces and can never use war as a method of neutralising international conflicts.

Despite that, the **JSDF** was founded on the basis that it was purely for self-defence, hence the name "Japanese Self-Defence Forces," and was built on a rather *loose* interpretation of Article 9 of the Constitution.

There are still some who argue it's a violation of the Constitution, which is why the JSDF have a **very limited capacity** to compensate that point of contention, leaving many restrictions that stopped the government from wielding military power as a means to assert control of the people. This ensured that power reminded divided and democracy was protected.

With all of this context in mind, it would be easy to see why Article 9 of the Constitution was a controversial topic in Japan. After all, for a country that had been devastated by war and had sworn to never get involved with the act again, it was obvious why such a thing required thorough and cautious discussion.

However, those restrictions were being threatened with the proposed changes. Article 9 was the only thing preventing policies and legislation that increase military power from passing. Military power in the hand's of the ruling Genesis Party would severely undermine the Diet's influence; Miyako couldn't let that happen.

'If I don't oppose the amendment of Article 9, the Genesis Party's power will only continue to grow, which might mean that the Civic Party may

never be able to make a comeback.'

Luckily, for the man seated on the bench, formerly known as Prime Minister Miyako, he was receiving more support than he expected, particularly from the Genesis Party, which also left him slightly surprised but not too surprised at the same time.

After all, the Genesis Party was comprised of predominantly relatively youthful people. With little to no old fossils being in the political party, they maintained their image of striving for change by seeking only the youthful candidates with talent. After all, cultivating the youth was one of the founding principles of the Genesis Party.

However, with those new talents came the inevitable clash of ideologies, and based on the volatility of the current discussions in the National Diet building, it was clear that there was a division in the party when it came to the amendment of Article 9.

On one side of the spectrum there were young Genesis Party Diet members who had more idealistic views, like **Horikita Ryouma**, aligning themselves with **anti-amendment** faction. They believed political independence did not have to be achieved through the military might that the amendment of Article 9 could bring,

Contrastingly, **Nagumo Katsuyuki** was one of the front runners for the opposing **pro-amendment** faction, who were a group pushing for Article 9's amendment to pass. They believed in enforcing security reforms by establishing a more active military that takes the initiative rather than being pacifistic.

Both of them are not factions in the traditional sense where they constantly oppose each other, rather, it would be more accurate to say that the only thing they disagreed on was the prospect of amending Article 9. When it came to other issues or the shaping of legislation that conforms to the Constitution, the party was quite unified under the Prime Minister's directive, which was bad news for Miyako.

'My scheme to divide the Genesis Party ultimately backfired due to the scorn it had brought on the Civic Party, yet...'

As an unintended consequence, the Genesis Party had divided on the issue of amending Article 9, but that wasn't something Miyako could take credit for, at least not in the way he wanted.

Following Genesis, Prime Minister Miyako had attempted to divide the Genesis Party—which had increasingly nationalistic and perhaps even the rare few members with ultra-right to fascist views—by proposing a new set of legislation.

His new policies aimed to bring in more immigrants to support the dwindling Japanese workforce that had been suffering due to the declining birth-rates in Japan. This is because a lower birth rate resulted in there being increasingly more old people and less young people, thereby decreasing the Japanese workforce.

Proposing new policies to address this problem may seem like a noble goal, but Miyako had a much more sinister motive behind the planned legislation.

Although the Genesis Party is primarily nationalistic, there are members within the party who lean more towards the supporting the economy rather than sovereignty, particularly the numerous businesses who had aligned themselves with the Genesis Party following Genesis.

Bringing in more labour would ultimately be more beneficial to Japan's economy, especially with addressing the issue of the declining birth-rate in Japan that was shortening the workforce over time. However, more importantly, it would also be very beneficial for corporations who, previously, had to pay hefty relocation instalments when acquiring skilled workers from overseas.

Therefore, by easing immigration policies, Miyako predicted that the more economic nationalists, like business owners, would be in favour of the policy. As a result, he believed this would create conflict with the more ultra-right members within the Genesis Party, who would feel betrayed that the economic nationalists were siding with the Civic Party and supporting the increment of foreign influence in Japan.

Miyako knew how strong the Genesis Party would become, which is

why he had taken immediate action to divide the Genesis Party before it could consolidate its power and fully unify.

That is why, at the time when he was still serving his term as the Prime Minister of Japan, bringing in more foreign workers had seemed like the correct move, at least from Miyako's perspective. But that sentiment had long since changed.

*'All that managed to do was increase the crime rate in Japan—a crime rate that the current Prime Minister, **Ayanokōji**, had significantly decreased due to events that had occurred during Genesis.'*

Recall that following Genesis, various crime syndicates with ties to Naoe, Isomaru and Ryosuke were effectively dismantled and destroyed with surgical precision, ultimately leading to higher productivity and a more prosperous society within Japan due to the significant reduction in organised crime.

Miyako thought that by bringing in more foreign immigrants, he could stop the Genesis Party's growth whilst simultaneously bolstering the Civic Party's reputation by addressing the nation's most critical problems. Yet, all he managed to do was further deteriorate the Civic Party's reputation due to the significant increase in the national crime rate that followed after his policies were implemented.

Consequently, the increase in the national crime rate was one of the reasons behind the push for amending Article 9, thereby creating a significant thorn in Miyako's side. This is why, although a divide had been created in the Genesis Party, it wasn't in the way that Miyako had hoped.

However, more importantly, the spike in criminal activity puzzled Miyako. He made sure that the immigrants didn't have outrageous or even a trace of a violent criminal record and were relatively skilled labour; a strict screening procedure to ensure that the influx of foreigners wouldn't be a threat to national security.

So why, despite those measures taken, did the foreigners who entered carry out so many violent and heinous crimes against Japanese nationals?

'Was it just a plain case of corruption that led to violent criminals slipping through immigration? Or is there something deeper at play?'

Miyako couldn't be certain, but was leaning towards the former because corruption would make the most sense. After all, as he thought back to piece of news from the past, he recalled that **Ryosuke Tanaka**, former leader of the now disbanded Peace Party, was found **dead** in his jail cell shortly after Genesis. It was reported as an unfortunate incident due to negligence of the guards who were supposed to protect the inmate. He was perhaps the only individual left who had a deeper understanding of the events of Genesis due to the disappearance of the lead investigator and his family; a result that frustrated Miyako. It smelled of foul play, but Miyako had no proof and the evidence presented depicting Ryosuke's guilt, as well as Naoe's and Isomaru's misdeeds, was far too damning. However, there was also another variable that convinced him it was corruption.

'Not only that, but I can't believe the ex-Director of the JSDF, Iwakura Genjirou, who I personally recommended and approved in my previous term, would do something so scandalous behind my back.'

Espionage and the illegal sale of military grade equipment, including firearms and even explosives; Iwakura Genjirou's crimes were exposed shortly after Atsuomi took the mantle of Prime Minister of Japan.

This was during the period of time where Atsuomi ordered his own independent rigorous investigations of people in positions of power, all in the name of uprooting corruption; an act that yielded positive results due to the substantial increase in the national budget.

The National Diet at the time, mainly composed of members of the Citizens' Party who had 'investigated' themselves following Genesis, were put under even more scrutiny when the public found out that they had tried to bury their wicked deeds, only to get caught during Atsuomi's investigations.

As a result, the Citizens' Party's image was further tainted, forcing them to try and rebrand under a new name: the *Civic Party*.

With all those facts in mind, corruption would make the most logical

sense. But why did Miyako feel a small inkling deep down in his bones that was trying to convince him otherwise? Was it truly a lapse in judgement that led to him appointing such a sinful man as the JSDF Director during his term as Prime Minister? He did after all let people like Naoe and Isomaru keep their positions within the Citizens' Party, so he couldn't rule out the possibility that he had chosen poorly again.

But unease still crept in.

Was the current Prime Minister really the righteous, brave, and heroic man portrayed publicly? What was beyond that pristine smile that was always captured on newspapers, news channels, and social media?

Miyako wasn't convinced of his magnanimous and compassionate public persona, especially following the events of Genesis. But he knew one thing with certainty: the man was not to be underestimated.

'Prime Minister Ayanokōji is definitely no fool. As soon as he acquired power, he already begun correcting my mistakes, which has only increased the reverence of the Genesis Party.'

Prime Minister Ayanokōji, who is excessively popular with the people and regarded as the hero of the nation, immediately made efforts to attempt to reduce the crime rates, a direct result of Miyako's poor decision making. But he didn't stop there.

Atsuomi incentivised Japanese citizens to have more children, providing a more sustainable method of addressing the issue with Japan's decreasing birth-rate and the flow-on effect of the decline in Japan's workforce.

For starters, he used the increased government budget—following the clean-up of the wicked roots in the Diet after Genesis and his appointment as Prime Minister—to subsidise childcare, provide cash payments for families with multiple children, and even give extra support for maternity leave.

Not only that, but in a bold move by **redirecting funds in the**

national budget, Atsuomi even increased funding to schools around Japan—schools like **ANHS**—encouraging children to stay in school and at the very least complete their high school diplomas; a pre-emptive step to address the issue of Japan's decreasing skilled workforce. He took one step further, providing an incentive for students to continue their studies into tertiary education by subsidising Japanese citizens' first year at university.

Every act aligned with what Atsuomi was known for: supporting the youth, reassuring the citizens that he wasn't a person who fed them false promises.

Coupled with greater education around safe sex as a precautionary measure to prevent teenage pregnancies, and companies subtly shifting towards favouring family-oriented work staff due to the government providing *certain* businesses subsidies, slowly led to Japan's birth rate to go from decreasing to reaching near equilibrium with signs of a positive trendline in the future; a feat that the mainstream media made sure to highlight whilst simultaneously smearing Miyako's past mistakes.

*'Fortunately, the **pro-amendment** Diet members have **not** acquired a majority in both Houses, which means that Article 9 won't be changed, at least for now.'*

As previously mentioned, the birth of a new Constitution in 1947 led to the formation of a democratic national government, also known as the *central government*.

There are three branches of the *central government*: legislative, executive and judicial. The legislative branch embodies the National Diet—which is analogous to Parliament in different countries—the executive branch embodies Cabinet, and the judicial branch embodies the Courts. However, for now, it's best to consider only the legislative branch.

The legislative branch, which is the *National Diet* itself, is composed of two houses: the *House of Representatives* and the *House of Councillors*. There are 465 seats in the House of Representatives and 248 seats in the House of Councillors, totalling to 713 people designated as Diet members, who are all selected by the Japanese

people during regular or general elections.

The total 713 members are then responsible for collectively deciding, debating and passing various bills, laws, national budgets, and policies. However, legislation must not contradict the "supreme laws" stipulated in the *Constitution*, which is why the Constitution is regarded as the building blocks that sets the foundations for how the country Japan is governed.

More importantly though, it should be noted that the members of the National Diet are the ones who decide who becomes the **Prime Minister**.

Now, when it comes to making an amendment to the Constitution, there are certain conditions that must be met.

In accordance with the Chapter IX: Amendments of the Constitution, Article 96 states: *Amendments to this Constitution shall be initiated by the Diet, through a concurring vote of two-thirds or more of all the members of each House and shall thereupon be submitted to the people for ratification, which shall require the affirmative vote of a majority of all votes cast thereon, at a special referendum or at such election as the Diet shall specify. Amendments when so ratified shall immediately be promulgated by the Emperor in the name of the people, as an integral part of this constitution.*

In simple terms, one would need to have a 2/3 majority in *each* house; that is, at least 310/465 seats from the House of Representatives and 166/248 seats from the House of Councillors, in favour of the amendment.

Following that condition's approval, a national referendum—in which the Japanese people vote for or against the amendment—must be passed, where at least a 51% majority is required.

If the referendum passes then the Constitution is lawfully amended and is publicly announced via a ceremony held by the *Emperor*, who *cannot* reject the changes because he has no political power and must follow orders directed by the Cabinet.

'But in the next Regular Election, we will undoubtedly lose the majority in

the House of Councillors if those seats are taken by Diet members from the Genesis Party. The risk of the amendment going through will increase if those seats are occupied by individuals who support militarisation.'

From Miyako's perspective, amending Article 9 will only stand to increase the Genesis Party's power, as they will establish a military backing for which the Civic Party won't possess, giving the Genesis Party even more influence and making it even more difficult for the Civic Party to ever make a comeback in politics, and that's assuming there isn't a change from a democracy to an authoritarian regime.

That and the fact that the people of Japan are becoming increasingly more nationalistic will mean that the Civic Party's influence will spiral downwards. Miyako couldn't let that happen. He still had ambitions to become Prime Minister again, especially since the person he was **favouring** before Genesis had **left** the Civic Party **two years ago**, after losing the election.

But that does not mean all Japanese citizens with nationalistic sentiments would support militarisation and the amendment of Article 9, at least, not immediately. After all, for decades they had been conditioned and educated since the end of World War II to avoid war, and rather seek peace, prioritise diplomacy, and protect democracy. This was a variable that worked in Miyako's favour.

However, Miyako recalled that the crimes committed by foreigners was only increasing, and the media was continually reminding the people that this was a mistake made by the Civic Party. The mainstream media platforms showcased how the victims' families had been broken, torn apart violently in a heartless manner by the influx of quote-on-quote 'dangerous foreigners'.

Miyako was certain with the *excessive* media coverage of the crimes, more and more Japanese citizens would soon start to resent foreigners and the Civic Party, especially since it was the Civic Party that had brought them to Japan.

Therefore, from Miyako's perspective, there was no guarantee that the people—who had been doctored with the mindset of peace for decades—would continue to carry that sentiment, or would shift towards supporting military power, forsaking Japan's pacifistic

stance.

Not only that, but the scandalous incident regarding the previous Director of the JSDF—who Miyako personally recommended and approved through the Ministry of Defence—had delivered another blow to the Civic Party's already tarnished reputation and was one of the key driving points for amending Article 9 of the Constitution.

Now being in a position where he was losing power, Miyako knew he had to ensure that the Genesis Party did not gain more influence because that could threaten their position as the main opposition party.

Thus, Miyako continued to show resistance to amending Article 9, as he did moments prior in the Diet session that commenced earlier in the day.

After all, even if a majority was lost within the House of Councillors, there was still the House of Representatives that was divided over the issue of Article 9, despite its seats being mainly occupied by Diet members of the Genesis Party. As long as that persisted, his position would become less threatening

Miyako's thoughts soon shifted, recalling something peculiar that left him with a sense of unease.

'Prime Minister Ayanokōji has started to take a more active supporting approach with regards to the amendment of Article 9.'

Initially, Miyako had witnessed Atsuomi maintain a firm **neutral stance** regarding the amendment of Article 9, attempting to mediate the division in the Diet and the ruling Genesis Party peacefully. However, despite his efforts, Miyako had observed that the Genesis Party remained internally divided over the issue of Article 9. As mentioned earlier, this was primarily because of a clash of ideologies between the relatively more youthful Diet members associated with the Genesis Party.

'But with the national crime rate continuing to increase, he has begun subtly advocating for security reforms that could be made possible through the amendment of Article 9, utilising the resources of the military that lays

dormant.'

In other words, Atsuomi had **broken away from the neutral stance** he had maintained since the beginning and had now started supporting the amendment.

Despite that change in demeanour, Miyako didn't think it was cause for concern. Although the Prime Minister holds a great deal of power, when it comes to legislation, the National Diet ultimately has the authority to decide what passes.

However, that is not to say the Prime Minister has no say over the matter. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that the Prime Minister and their party typically play a key role in influencing the legislative process. So, a more active approach could prove to be a nuisance for Miyako.

Noticing that the sun had begun its descent, Miyako got up from the bench, making his way home, blissfully unaware that **something wicked was brewing in the background**.

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Hope you enjoyed the chapter!

Don't worry if you're confused with the nuances of politics, it should be made clear as you read further in the next chapters.

Japanese Constitution: https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html

V1 - Chapter 2: New Developments

Location: Tokyo

Dawn had just broken out on a cold Saturday morning in the suburban streets of Tokyo.

Within one of the homes, a girl, appearing to be in her second year of middle school, was trotting along a narrow hallway, moving towards the guest room situated in the quiet household.

Her long, light blonde hair, that reached just below her waist, was slightly parted to the side, exposing her large, expressive blue eyes, that emphasised her youthful and innocent look.

She was best friends with the son of the man who owned the house and was a regular visitor, so she had no qualms wearing casual attire. On this occasion, given it was a rather chilly morning, she was wearing a cotton, turtleneck sweater with comfy leggings and woollen socks that had small animals dotted on them.

Right next to her shy smile were her blooming cheeks, which were slightly flushed with a subtle hue of red, but the reason behind her nervous yet radiant expression had nothing to do with the cold of the early morning.

'I wonder if he has woken up yet. Matsuo-san prepared breakfast a lot earlier this morning.'

Matsuo was the owner of the home she currently found herself in. He had a younger son, Eiichirō, who had already left very early morning for his soccer game due to the match being hosted at a faraway location. As a result, Matsuo had planned to prepare breakfast prior to the usual time before driving Eiichirō to the venue.

That was the reason why she had arrived much earlier than she usually does, offering her assistance to ease Matsuo's burden. In the past, she had offered to help out whenever she could, knowing that Matsuo was often busy working long hours as a butler for wealthy families.

'Although, that has changed in recent times.'

Knock* *Knock* *Knock

Arriving at the door, she gently drummed her now clenched fist against it, calling out to her senpai who had been staying in the household for a few months now.

"**Kiyotaka-senpai**, are you awake?" the girl called out softly before patiently waiting for a response.

Upon hearing no response, she performed her usual structured routine of knocking a few more times before beginning to gently open the door, aiming to take a quick peek inside and double check whether he really was sleeping or not.

'He's probably still sleeping. It's quite early.'

However, to her surprise, the moment she was about to open the door, it sprung open.

She flinched reflexively, not at all prepared for the sight in front of her.

'W-Wha—'

The view that laid before the young maiden's eyes made her movements lock-up immediately, breath catch, and mind short-circuit.

A tall, half-naked teenage boy—who looked approximately a year older than her—stood at the door frame, the veins in his toned forearms tensing with his iron-clad grip on the door handle.

As her eyes drifted upwards from his arms, she was met with his lean but well-defined figure with a towel dangling around his neck. His

broad shoulders and sharp chest lines had hints of moisture scattered on them, causing his physique to glisten under the rays of light from the drawn back curtains that exposed the rising morning sun. It was clear that he had just been exercising prior to her arrival and had just begun getting changed.

But that wasn't what she was thinking about at the moment, because she was immediately hypnotized by a singular trickle of moisture drifting down from his upper chest towards his midsection, highlighting his sculpted abdominal muscles.

Gulp

The droplet descended further, making her involuntarily swallow as it moved down towards the more 'dangerous' areas that were slightly more visible due to his low hanging shorts, which did nothing to hide his tapered waistline.

The view was something that she hadn't got to see in the morning—or ever, for that matter.

Usually, he would always be dressed ready to eat breakfast when she visited, so she wasn't aware that the teenage boy completed his workouts very early in the morning.

Despite having small traces of sweat on his body, Tsubasa didn't find any unpleasant scent entering her nose.

But that was probably because she was too busy ogling the teenage boy who she had, unknowingly, developed foreign feelings for—feelings which she couldn't understand and had never felt before.

'W-What kind of body is this!?'

How could a boy, who was only a year older than her, have such a physique? What sort of training does one have to do to achieve this? Was he just a genetic monstrosity?

Before she could contemplate the situation further, she was immediately snapped out of her trance as the young man, Kiyotaka, started calling out to her with his usual flat voice and blank face.

"...Tsubasa-san? Tsubasa-san? Hello?"

Her face immediately skyrocketed in temperature as she quickly realised that she had been shamelessly checking out Kiyotaka; a boy who always seemed to have a magnetic pull on her eyes.

"Are you alright? Do you need something?" Kiyotaka innocently asked, tilting his head slightly.

Tsubasa, who was still startled by his impressive physique and his nonchalant demeanour, scrambled to regain her composure.

"Y-Yes! U-um, I just wanted to inform you t-that breakfast is r-ready on the table if you want it, K-Kiyotaka-senpai!"

She couldn't help but stumble over her words, averting her gaze after feeling the heat of his piercing golden eyes that felt like they were drilling holes through her.

'I—I shouldn't stare, it's rude.'

However, despite her polite nature, something inside her willed her to take another peek.

With her cheeks as flush as a ripe apple, she shyly sneaked another glance at Kiyotaka, 'subtly' studying his sharp facial features. They were details that she probably spent a little too much time admiring from a distance, often when watching him play basketball or soccer with Eiichirō.

However, as her blue eyes shifted upwards from his jawline, she could have sworn that there was a trace of amusement in his normally serene, golden eyes, that laid beneath his slightly damp, light-brown bangs.

'E-Eh!? Is he enjoying this!?'

Before she could decide whether Kiyotaka was intentionally teasing her, he suddenly started approaching her, pulling her out of her thoughts as she moved backwards instinctively.

His long strides were met with her small timid retreating ones,

swiftly causing an audible thud to disturb the otherwise peaceful corridor, as her back collided with the wall.

But before she could even muster a thought, his left hand quickly shot up with a loud thump, startling her as she flinched slightly at the impact.

His right hand immediately followed, grasping her chin with a firm yet delicate grip, caging the young maiden against his towering figure.

Ba-dump* *Ba-dump* *Ba-dump

The proximity of his bare torso, and skin-to-skin contact of his large hand on her chin, made her lips part sightly, as blood began violently pumping from her chest, rushing towards her cheeks.

Against the wishes of her pounding heart, she attempted to look to the side, away from embodiment of sin who had trapped her against the wall.

But the devilish boy didn't allow her such a luxury.

He gradually applied pressure, forcibly moving her chin so that their eyes met.

And he didn't stop there.

His thumb began slowly grazing the tip of her lower lip, his movements embedded with a gentle tenderness—as if he was already tasting them.

The bold act left her wide-eyed like a lost puppy and caused a surge of heat to course through her body despite the cold of the morning, making her feel as if she was on fire.

His usual stoic expression—that she was most familiar with—quickly vanished, as the corners of his lips turned upwards ever-so-slightly, forming a very small, yet extremely alluring smirk that did wonders to her fragile heart, making it skip multiple beats.

But she was not at all prepared for his following words and actions.

Now staring at her soft pink lips, and still affectionately brushing against them with his thumb, the teenage boy spoke with a seductive edge to his usual tranquil voice.

"Hmm... I suppose I did work up quite an *appetite*. A quick *bite* won't hurt."

He began leaning closer, his lips slowly approaching Tsubasa's, causing the young maiden's pulse to quicken, heart rapidly drum against her chest, and her breathing hitch.

'W-W-What!? D-Does he really mean what I think he means?! I-Is he really going to k-kiss me?'

Although she had had an embarrassing dream about a scenario similar to this one, she couldn't believe that it might actually become a reality.

A part of her wanted to run away in sheer embarrassment since she had never kissed a boy before, but her heart—for reasons she hadn't consciously acknowledged or didn't want to acknowledge—pounded against her ribcage in protest.

Thus, Tsubasa accepted her fate and closed her eyes, nervously yet also excitedly waiting in anticipation for their lips to finally meet.

Whilst remaining frozen against the wall with her breath still caught in her throat, she waited for that mystical moment, suddenly feeling that time was stretching endlessly.

But no warmth ever graced her lips, leaving the young maiden confused.

'H-Huh? What's going on?'

It wasn't until she heard the faint shuffle of footsteps fading down the corridor that she opened her eyes back to reality, turning just in time to catch a glimpse of the teenage boy—his hands tucked into his pockets, fully dressed in casual attire and clean of any sweat. He continued to nonchalantly walk towards the kitchen with a composed air about him, as if nothing had transpired at all.

But suddenly, he came to an abrupt stop before looking over his shoulder, adorning his signature stoic expression before using a sickeningly calm tone to address her.

"Aren't you coming, Tsubasa-san? You said breakfast is ready, and I'm starved."

The vast contrast in expression made the girl question if she had finally gone insane and had actually imagined the whole scenario in her head.

But she knew that it really did happen because she could still feel the heat of his breath near her face.

However, the way he switched temperament with such polarity troubled her greatly, which is why she couldn't help but voice her grievances about the teenage boy's actions, even if he couldn't hear them.

"Baka... you shouldn't toy with a young maiden's heart," Tsubasa whispered under her breath before an 'angry' pout took over her otherwise tomato-like appearance.

'H-He's always does this! Teasing me at random moments but then stops, going back to his usual stone-faced expression as if nothing happened.'

Just what was going on in that boy's head? That was something Tsubasa always wondered when she visited the Matsuo residence.

Unfortunately for her, whenever she tried to ask about it, he would always found a way to leave her flustered. The occasional occurrences of his playful and teasing demeanour would usually end up with her rushing away from the scene out of sheer embarrassment. That, or he would redirect the conversation elsewhere without her realising.

Tsubasa was too upset to question just how the boy could clean himself of the scarce residues of sweat on his body and change his clothes all before she had managed to open her eyes.

Other, more 'important', thoughts took form in her shaken mind.

'Does he do this with all the girls he knows? Or is it just me?'

The answers to those questions caused an unfamiliar emotion to course through the innocent blonde, a sentiment that contradicted her kind and polite personality.

She knew she wasn't the only girl who had their eyes on the young man. When her friend group joined her one day to watch Kiyotaka and Eiichirō play basketball, they had seemed to be enchanted by him even when he had remained indifferent to their presence.

Was it his mature yet still playful nature that attracted their eye? The palpable confidence in his unshakeable, straight and sturdy posture? His princely good looks and impressive physique? His skills in basketball? Or maybe the rare, slight up-turn of his lips whenever they went out to get ice-cream that captivated them?

Tsubasa figured it was a mixture of those reasons that explained her friends' fixation on Kiyotaka and why—since that day—they always joined her when Kiyotaka and Eiichirō played sports.

But she didn't like the heaviness in her heart that the feelings attributed to her current thoughts brought within her, thus, she brushed those sentiments away, opting to try and calm her still racing pulse.

After taking a few deep breaths, she gradually regained her bearings, letting out a huff before marching towards the kitchen, getting ready to confront her senpai and not go red-faced; a feat that she hadn't accomplished ever since he started staying in Matsuo's house.

'I'll use his tactics against him! I'll be direct just like he is!'

That was the plan—which was quickly thrown out of the window as soon as she caught a glance of the teenage boy's face, wearing a rare expression that caused the young maiden to, once again, blush profusely.

'Unfair... How can he be so adorable...'

Even if his face was usually stiff, this time was different.

His eyes were seemingly closed in satisfaction, innocently chowing down on the fruit-flavoured yoghurt. The edges of his mouth were turned upwards, but only very slightly, framing a small smile that radiated an innocent, boyish charm, which instantly captivated Tsubasa.

Even if he always teased her—with today's case being the worst given that she got a front-row seat to Kiyotaka's impressive physique that any teenage girl would double take—it was times like these where she couldn't help but gush over him like a schoolgirl would over her crush.

Primarily because that small, yet rare smile he currently wore, provided a significant contrast to his stoic and tranquil demeanour that had drawn her in when she first met the boy—a characteristic that she had come to greatly admire.

The way he always carried himself exuded a calm confidence—a trait for which she hadn't seen before, even amongst her senpais from middle school.

In school, Tsubasa had seen that children her age were constantly worried and insecure about their other schoolmates' opinions, afraid of being labelled a title that could stick with them for the rest of their schooling if they didn't conform to the established social dynamics and cliques.

Not only that, but Tsubasa had seen how kids from school were always trying to maintain their position within the social ladder, or worse, climb it at the expense of others. She had seen how girls complimented one another when face-to-face, but when behind closed doors, would often badmouth one another, often leading to surface level or fake friendships.

But Kiyotaka was different.

He didn't seem to have a care about other people's thoughts of him, which was a breath of fresh air for Tsubasa.

However, there was one thing that irked her and made her click her tongue internally.

'He could be more sensitive though. I don't know whether he's being serious or not when he's... when's he's acting like t-that!'

However, despite 'that'—for the times that she hadn't ran away from embarrassment—she would say that she had enjoyed his company, even if she knew very little about him.

There were things she found interesting him about him. One of them being the unshakable air of control that surrounds him despite his background.

She recalled that Kiyotaka had told her that he had been homeschooled his whole life and wasn't attending any school at the moment due to him respecting his father's wish of remaining homeschooled.

With that fact in mind, she imagined that a child who had been homeschooled their whole life would be shy, awkward, or overly nervous, making conversations difficult to initiate or hold.

Yet, that wasn't the case at all. He never seemed to panic or show any gestures that indicated he was nervous when talking to anyone. Even if he was her senpai, he just always seemed so grounded. She couldn't help but think of him as an adult already—well, mostly. The only contradiction to that assertion was that for whatever reason, he liked to tease her a lot.

'Hmph. He has definitely no problems talking to girls.'

That was something that could not be said to be the case for a lot of the boys at her school. From her experience, some were too shy, some too noisy, some too... lustful, and others too immature.

However, seeing a more innocent and childlike side of Kiyotaka implicitly told the young maiden that there were more layers to the boy she thought highly of, making Tsubasa all that more interested to learn about him.

Unfortunately for Tsubasa, there was barriers to that goal.

'Matsuo-san said that Kiyotaka's mother is no longer in the picture and that Kiyotaka's father is a family friend who has to work abroad for a

long-term project.'

As mentioned before, Kiyotaka was the one who had told her that he had been homeschooled his entire life, and that his father was keeping him away from school, at least for now.

But that was all he had really told her. Even if he seemed to speak well, he rarely revealed any information or details about himself, leaving Tsubasa to only learn about him through observation.

'Come to think of it, he always teases me when we're alone together...'

Was it a coincidence? Was it just his nature to be a flirt? Did he do it out of amusement?

...Or was there another motive?

She wasn't sure, after all, it wasn't like he didn't stop teasing her even in the presence of other people like her best friend, Eiichirō. With only that information, one would think that he finds her reactions amusing.

However, in the first place, she had no intention of prying into his life, deciding to respect his privacy. If Kiyotaka wanted to talk to her, she would be open to conversation.

She couldn't know dangerous it was for her to learn certain **truths** about the boy in question too soon.

□□□□□□□ ✧ M A C H I N A T I O N S ✧ □□□□□□□

Time had passed, and the duo had long since finished breakfast. Tsubasa had gone home, opting to hang out with her friends from middle school after having completed household chores which she didn't have to do, but still decided to.

Meanwhile, Kiyotaka, who was the only one left in the home, was seated on the couch, his hand drifting towards the remote, getting ready to power on the TV to watch the news.

With the press of a button, the large LED TV zapped back to life.

Switching to the main news channel, he heard the familiar sweet voice of a pretty female news reporter. However, this time, her soothing voice had lost its usual harmony, conveying nothing but concern and sympathy.

"In another violent incident, a Japanese family of four were found killed in their home in Tokyo in what investigators ruled both as a case of aggravated robbery and murder. The father, **Kobayashi Masaru**, was a Diet member from the ruling Genesis Party."

A clip of the crime scene proceeded to play, showcasing yellow tape and the outside of a rather expensive home. However, the victims were not shown, the anchor citing the state that they were left in was too **gruesome**.

"Law enforcement has caught the perpetrator, a foreign man in his 40s who had immigrated to Japan following the ease in immigration by the policies enacted by former Prime Minister Miyako."

Numerous statistics appeared on the screen, showing the increase in incidence of violent crimes after the ease of immigration before switching back to the female anchor seated at her desk.

"Fortunately, Prime Minister Ayanokōji continues to crack down on immigration protocols and the national crime rate, attempting to repair the devastating damage done by the Miyako administration and his cabinet ministers."

Having delivered the more distressing news, she moved onto more positive topics, talking about the various benefits provided to the youth by the policies that the central government had introduced.

"The prestigious **Advanced Nurturing High School**—managed under **Governor Kijima's** jurisdiction—has received an additional boost in funding. Other schools across the country have also received similar benefits."

That particular piece of news caught Kiyotaka's ear. In his spare time, that he had an abundance of, he had been closely following the events of Genesis from the past and gathered that Kijima *was* widely regarded to be the most likely to succeed Miyako and become the

Prime Minister.

'Huh. Despite his decrease in popularity and financial backers, it seems he was still able to assume the position of Governor of Tokyo.'

Kiyotaka quickly deduced that it was probably due to his hand in the foundation of the **Advanced Nurturing High School** (ANHS), which managed to win him enough votes during the gubernatorial election in Tokyo based on a first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting system; that is, in simple terms, a popularity contest within Tokyo.

But it was a still very close battle, and the campaigning by Kijima would have required a great deal of money, something which Kijima somehow had an abundance of even after Genesis. It was an interesting detail that Kiyotaka took note of.

The anchor continued speaking, but Kiyotaka tuned it out, electing to focus on other details.

'Matsuo seems to be very fond of ANHS, mentioning every so often that it was a high school worth attending.'

However, along this train of thought, Kiyotaka found himself wondering what his father's motives was for sending him to this household under an **alias** with a different surname, leaving him to stew for months in the outside world.

Following his return to the White Room, Kiyotaka's growth had skyrocketed, flying through the curriculum that Suzukake had painstakingly developed to last for 9 years but, to Suzukake's dismay, was completed in less than 5 years.

Even with some of the additional components that made Kiyotaka's training downright hellish, Kiyotaka did not waver.

One of the major additional components of the curriculum aimed to improve his mastery of **lethal weapons**, particularly firearms. It was something strange that Kiyotaka took note of, given that Japan had very strict laws on owning let alone using firearms. He wondered when such skills would be made use of.

But more importantly, now that Kiyotaka had once again found

himself in a new environment, he knew he had to adapt quickly, realising the importance of improving his ability to mimic the gestures of normal people.

Although in the White Room, changing one's tone of voice and facial expression may not have a lot of value, in the real world, where normal people laugh, smile, flirt, and cry, it had a significant advantage.

Which is why, Kiyotaka—having been exposed to the real world prior to his arrival at the Matsuo household—focussed on mastering his self-presentation and communication skills. In other words, his ability to manipulate his facial expressions and tone of voice.

This was achieved by carrying out countless simulations from the data he had collected during his stay at the villa from **five years ago**, as well as new data based on interactions within Matsuo's home.

However, after completing the simulations, real world testing was required, which might explain some of his rather brazen behaviour, particularly around a certain blonde kouhai.

Despite that, Kiyotaka believed there was more to be gained than lost if he developed these skills because it was more knowledge to satisfy his intellectual curiosity and further his growth, aligning with the philosophy that the White Room had drilled into his head: if you cease to grow, you cease to exist.

That, and the fact that Kiyotaka felt that his growth was beginning to stagnate in the White Room, evident by how quickly he completed the second phase of the new curriculum. Therefore, he had to look elsewhere to keep developing.

More importantly, constantly acting like a robot in the world beyond the White Room's walls would only make him stand out like an alien, a reality Kiyotaka had gathered during his visit at the villa.

Hence, Kiyotaka figured that occasionally diversifying his facial expressions and voice would lead people to believe he was a normal, hormonal teenage boy.

Although Kiyotaka wouldn't admit it, his changing hormones upon entering teenage hood may have influenced him to an extent, causing him to be a little *too* playful with his words and actions during what he called the "testing phase". As a result, after his last experiment earlier this morning, where he wanted to facilitate the extremities of certain behavioural patterns, he realised that he might have gotten a little carried away.

'Hmm... Perhaps this morning was a bit too much. I'll dial it back for future interactions.'

After all, Kiyotaka had been in isolation for the past 5 years in the White Room. He wanted to ascertain what was within the acceptable limit to maximise his understanding. Of course, with such a goal in mind, he definitely needed practise if he wanted to perfect his ability to regulate his facial expressions and tone of voice, applying the right changes to achieve the desired result.

However, that's not to say he would completely abandon that quote-on-quote "robotic" appearance. Kiyotaka believed that it had its own unique use if implemented correctly at the right time in certain situations.

'Regardless, my father hasn't provided any further directives during my stay at the Matsuo household.'

His father's orders were suspicious, but didn't reveal enough information for Kiyotaka to be able to fully understand his motives. The first time he had seen the outside world, the reason cited for the exposure was for preparation to meet future investors. However, strangely, this little 'field trip' had no clear indication of what his father was planning.

"Live life like a normal person in their home and await further instructions..." Kiyotaka whispered out loud to no one in particular, recalling fragments of the words his father had said nonchalantly months ago, as if they did not have any significant implications.

Those weren't the only words; he was of course reminded of the consequences of insubordination and what would happen if he created any trouble. But that was not what Kiyotaka was pondering

at this very moment

'It's strange.'

As a very young child, he had always wanted to see the outside world but had suppressed that sentiment in favour of survival and self-preservation.

Yet now his father was handing him that opportunity again with seemingly no strings attached?

That couldn't be right.

No.

Kiyotaka knew better, especially since the day of the **Test** from **five years ago**, where he was reminded of the fact that **everything had a cost**.

It was a day he would rather forget, yet still forcibly remained engraved in his memories.

Therefore, he suspected—no, he was certain that one of his father's motives was to observe him in this new environment, testing his loyalty, seeing how he would behave when given more liberty.

Along this train of thought, a memory began to play in Kiyotaka's mind.

It was late night. The Matsuo household was plunged in darkness.

Kiyotaka was about to head to bed, navigating the pitch-black corridors to the guest room without needing any source of light, an easy accomplishment primarily because he had already memorised the layout of the house. However, there was another factor attributed to his success.

When he had returned to the White Room, he underwent an assortment of rigorous conditioning regimes, one of which aimed to reduce his reliance on sight and force him to develop an acute sense of spatial awareness and sound perception, enhancing his ability to navigate his surroundings in complete darkness.

The conditioning involved depriving him of all external auditory and visual stimulus by locking him inside a pitch-black chamber that was soundproofed from the outside, thereby conditioning him to amplify his other senses to compensate.

In the past, he had already been exposed to circumstances that required him to be able to move in the absence of light and memorise the layout of rooms in the White Room. The attempts the other fourth generation subjects had tried to make on his life at curfew hours whilst he was sleeping required that if he wanted to survive.

Only death awaited the careless.

That was the reality only Kiyotaka had to endure having been ostracised by his peers, who—despite having fear carved into their hearts from Kiyotaka's retaliatory acts of extreme violence—still actively strived to drive him to ruin, waiting for the moment he let his guard down.

This was a burden only Kiyotaka had to bear as the top student of the fourth generation.

So, at that time, he made the effort to memorise the exact lay out of where he was sleeping in, a contingency to increase his probability of survival. After all, even if he could endure sleepless nights, his performance would be impaired as a result. Such an outcome was unsustainable, which is why, memorisation and familiarisation of every room he encountered in the White Room was a necessity to maintain his progress in the curriculum.

However, this new 'training' he was exposed to was different and required him to adapt rather quickly.

The chamber he was locked in had various obstacles, some of which even moved periodically in random directions and speeds. Additionally, the physical terrain he was standing on also changed, meaning that he couldn't rely on memory alone to be successful.

Since there were no flashes of light to give him a chance to memorise the layout of the chamber, he could not use his extensive memory to his advantage. Even if he could, the fact that the changes were

random meant that memorising or recognising patterns would do no good for him.

At the time, Kiyotaka had quickly reached these conclusions and knew he had to changes his methods to suit the new environment he found himself.

This involved gradually enhancing his ability to greatly focus his hearing and recognise and capture sound reflections, as well as perceive the changes in the speed of airflow near moving obstructions that had varying velocities.

Such things were demanded of him if he wanted to avoid collisions, no matter how ridiculous such conditioning was in the grand scheme of things.

Any collisions that occurred during the conditioning period were tallied. The total number of collisions would dictate the severity of his punishment, and that punishment decided by the instructors was distributed out in the form of physical pain after the training period for that day ended.

There was no disadvantage to using physical pain as a method of punishment because it only increased Kiyotaka's pain tolerance, 'encouraging' him to avoid collisions.

In the end, it was safe to say that even in the case that Kiyotaka did not have a fantastic memory, he was always hyper-aware of his surroundings and capable of navigating darkness effortlessly, a skill that would likely to be useful later in his life due to his father's shadow always looming in the background.

Whilst moving through the darkness, the sudden sound of a light being flicked on in the distance immediately captured Kiyotaka's gaze, the new stimuli heightening his senses.

Looking to the source, Kiyotaka observed that the intensity of light was low, implying that the source of luminescence was from a small electronically powered device, probably a bedside lamp.

He crept closer to the faint rays of light escaping from under the

closed door.

The walls were a lot thicker, and the door seemed padded. Despite that, given his training, for a few seconds he had managed to capture broken chunks of words that were seemingly being whispered, emerging from the room before the call was cut.

"...yes, he's well behaved..."

"...he plays basketball and soccer with my son..."

Matsuo was talking to someone on the phone. Whether that 'someone' was his father or not did not matter because in the end, Kiyotaka knew that the information always going to be filtered to his father.

He had always suspected that his father was keeping an eye on him, but that was just the confirmation he needed.

There was no doubt in Kiyotaka's mind that Matsuo was a kind, hardworking and polite man who took care of him. However, it was evident to Kiyotaka who Matsuo ultimately reported to. That information was useful in of itself because it gave Kiyotaka more insight into what was being relayed to his father.

The memory ended there.

However, to Kiyotaka, the most interesting detail from this memory was how this information was seemingly relayed.

Based on the level of technology he had witnessed in the White Room when compared to the outside world, there were far more efficient methods to monitor Kiyotaka.

Yet, his father, or whoever it was talking on the phone, decided to 'check in' using a phone call?

It left Kiyotaka wondering how much Matsuo truly knew about his background. Was it simply just a call to portray the image of a 'concerned' father?

That wasn't the only theory Kiyotaka had formulated. He had postulated various conjectures with regards to his father's motives.

However, without more intel, nothing could be certain, and Kiyotaka wasn't the type of person to base his future plans or strategies on weak foundations. For any planning, he tended to avoid actions that he determined to yield a low probability of success; that was just how he operated.

That is why he was remaining passive. Not showing any acts of aggression towards his father's will, biding his time to obtain more information before making any further moves. At the moment, his father's presumed interests aligned with his own, primarily because his time in the Matsuo household had allowed him to gather a lot of information using the 'internet'; a feature of the modern world that he found to be particularly useful.

With the internet, Kiyotaka focussed on studying current events and the political landscape to get a better understanding of his father's influence. That, and also to learn more about what a 'normal person' was exactly, as well as the sorts of things children his age are interested in.

More importantly though, it provided Kiyotaka a glimpse of the sorts of people linked to his father. After all, his father was the Prime Minister, and a man of that status likely had some powerful enemies even if the common people seemed to love him. Attracting their attention wouldn't be in Kiyotaka's best interest considering that the focal point of his thoughts had always been based on self-preservation and survival—at least, that was what **he repeatedly told himself,** following the day of the **Test** from five years ago, when his thoughts went astray.

BLAM

The front door suddenly burst open, breaking the young man out of his turbulent thoughts as he was greeted with a surprising yet unsurprising sight.

"Kiyotaka! I'm back from soccer! I'm super pumped to play video games with the master himself!"

Despite having just returned from a long drive and played a game of soccer, somehow, Eiichirō, who is a year younger than Kiyotaka, still

had enough energy to be so cheerful.

But those thoughts were no longer flowing through Kiyotaka's brain because he was more focussed on Eiichirō's weak attempt to butter him up, causing the teenage boy to narrow his eyes ever so slightly.

With a dry voice laced with a hint of mockery, Kiyotaka prodded at the young boy's meagre skill in a specific first-person shooter from the western world, a game that Eiichirō had stumbled upon whilst browsing the internet. It was relatively new, having only been released two years ago and wasn't all that popular in Japan, but it was popular in southeast Asian countries that were geographically close by.

For some reason, Eiichirō liked playing it, even though he was downright terrible at it and often got angry and frustrated with the game and the players, cursing them with particularly foul language that his father, Matsuo, did not approve of.

Was it addiction? Or was he just a masochist who enjoyed being "one-tapped" at the beginning of the round? Kiyotaka was sure it was a mixture of the two, considering his *other* observations of the boy in question.

"Don't try and flatter me. Just say you want your account boosted."

Eiichirō's expression morphed into one that screamed "How did you know?" before uttering a week rebuttal.

"W-What? How could you suggest something so scandalous and immoral! I would never ask—"

He was about to continue, but stopped after seeing Kiyotaka's cold, almost mechanical stare, that sent shivers done his spine. Eiichirō had learned the hard way that Kiyotaka was not someone who made empty threats.

"Okay! Okay! Fine! Could you please boost my account, Kiyotaka? You're my only hope if I want to escape from silver rank... again."

Kiyotaka let out a deep sigh. Did he seriously de-rank so quickly? Kiyotaka had boosted him to the top of 'gold nova' with extreme ease,

humouring Eiichirō's claims of "my teammates are trash, but I deserve gold nova!" despite Eiichirō 'bottom fragging' nearly every game according to online statistics.

Instead of giving a straight answer, Kiyotaka feigned struggle, as if the request was asking too much of him.

"Hmm... I don't know. I'm pretty tired you know."

Eiichirō's eyes abruptly widened into large saucers, his face emanating a strong disbelief before voicing his protests.

"What do you mean you're "pretty tired"? You've just stayed in the house, sitting on your ass all day! C'mon, please? Help a brother out I beg you!"

Kiyotaka was considering correcting Eiichirō's false assumption of him "sitting on his ass all day", but decided to take a more 'interesting' route after seeing a familiar blue-eyed blonde appear in the doorway.

A small, calculated smirk, the same one from this morning, quickly emerged on the teenage boy's face as he eyed Tsubasa with a glint of mischief in his golden eyes.

"I wasn't, as you say, 'sitting on my ass all day', isn't that right, *Tsubasa-chan*? Tell him what you saw this morning." Kiyotaka rhetorically asked with a smooth tone of voice, emphasising key words that he knew would induce an explosive reaction in the innocent, blonde kouhai.

And he wasn't wrong with that prediction.

Tsubasa's face immediately reddened at the affectionate way Kiyotaka had addressed her; the incident he was indirectly referring to only deepened her blush.

"E-Eh!? W-Why are you bringing that up now?!" Tsubasa cried out in embarrassment, flailing her woolly sleeves that only made her frantic movements look that much more comical.

Unfortunately for her, that outburst would no doubt encourage a

third-party to join the fray.

A playful expression quicky took over Eiichirō's face, electing to ignore Tsubasa's distress and instead deciding to dramatically point at Kiyotaka, like a detective would when uncovering a scandal.

"Aha! I knew the rumours were true! The enigmatic Kiyotaka-sama claims another one! Just how many young maidens' hearts has this ladykiller stolen!?" Eiichirō said with a voice full of overblown conviction, causing Tsubasa's face to burn hotter.

Tsubasa's whipped her head towards Eiichirō, clenching her hands into tiny fists to try and appear threatening but ultimately failing spectacularly.

"W-Would you stop spouting nonsense!?" Tsubasa exclaimed, stomping her foot indignantly.

But Eiichirō just smirked in amusement before continuing to tease Tsubasa with a sickeningly sweet voice.

"Oh~? You're going to deny these claims even with that tomato-like expression?"

Those words immediately froze Tsubasa's movements, but she didn't have enough time to come up with a response. That was her undoing as a 'sinister' glint took root in Eiichirō's eyes.

With a hand on his chest and a dramatic voice, Eiichirō continued his teasing, jokingly making a guess at what Tsubasa had seen in the morning whilst he was playing soccer.

"Oh no, could it be that little puppy-chan stumbled on Kiyotaka... changing!?"

Silence ensued—until Tsubasa's blue eyes widened in horror, letting out a small, strangled noise, recalling the 'show' Kiyotaka had graced her with in the morning.

Her face was now an atomic shade of red, remembering for the second time how close Kiyotaka, and his lips, had been to her.

The nickname that Eiichirō gave her just poured gasoline on the rising flames of embarrassment that begun building up in Tsubasa's stomach.

Meanwhile, Kiyotaka, with his arms now crossed, adorning a stoic expression, simply raised an eyebrow, almost impressed that Eiichiro unintentionally deduced an event that was close enough to what really happened.

Seeing Tsubasa's volatile reaction, Eiichirō's was shocked momentarily before his grin widened unnaturally, realising that he had correctly guessed her source of distress without meaning to.

"That's it, isn't it? Little puppy-chan saw something she shouldn't have! That's why—"

SMACK

"Ow!" Eiichirō exclaimed in pain, rubbing the back of his head to soothe the building soreness.

"W-Why do you have to make everything sound so weird?!" Tsubasa cried out, before continuing to hit Eiichirō on the back of his head,

"Ow! Ow! Okay, okay! I'll stop... for now," Eiichirō cheekily added before redirecting his eyes, that shone with trouble, to Kiyotaka.

Clasping his hands together as if he was a student greeting his master, he began praising Kiyotaka with a dramatic tone of voice.

"You never fail to amaze me, Kiyotaka. Leaving maidens speechless with just your *bare* presence. This must be a skill passed through the generations of your bloodline!"

Kiyotaka, appearing completely unbothered by Eiichirō's brazen act and play on words, calmly exhaled before deadpanning his own response that left Eiichirō choking on air.

"If I had such a skill, you wouldn't be talking right now."

Despite herself being incredibly embarrassed, Tsubasa let out a series of involuntary giggles that she desperately tried to stifle.

After catching enough flies in his wide-open mouth, Eiichirō regained his bearings after Kiyotaka's unexpected 'attack', attempting to redirect the limelight back to Tsubasa, knowing that battling Kiyotaka in a game of words was a lost cause.

"A-Ah, I see now! Tsubasa's fallen too deep, already beginning to laugh at his jokes now! Your power is truly otherworldly, Kiyotaka-sama."

Before Tsubasa could react, approaching footsteps caught the trio's attention, as an older individual made his appearance at the still open doorway.

"Why could I hear screaming all the way from the car?" Matsuo asked, not knowing that he would soon regret that decision.

Eiichirō turned to his father, his expression turning to one of excitement before making a declaration full of seriousness, despite the ridiculousness of his following words.

"Dad! You have returned just in time to bear witness to Kiyotaka's crimes against maidenkind!"

Matsuo stared at his son with a blank expression before examining the other two, starting with Tsubasa, who looked like she was ready to explode, and ending at Kiyotaka, who exuded a composed demeanour, as if nothing out of the ordinary had taken place.

Letting out a deep sigh whilst rubbing his left temple, he opened his mouth, uttering words chained with fatigue.

"Kiyotaka... what did you do?"

Before responding to Matsuo's question, Kiyotaka took a quick peek at Tsubasa only to find her blue eyes begging him not to say anything.

A flicker of amusement crossed his golden irises before he uttered a simple answer with the dryest voice possible.

"Breathing, mostly."

Eiichirō burst into a fit of laughter whilst Tsubasa let out a sigh of relief, thinking that she finally had a chance to breathe.

But that thought was short lived because Eiichirō got the bright idea of continuing his silly behaviour in front of his father, once again clapping his hands together to form the gesture of a dramatic prayer.

"Oh, great Kiyotaka-sama, please share your divine wisdom of maiden-conquering with this humble disciple!"

Kiyotaka just impassively stared, not showing any sliver of reaction—until he decided to humour him, but not in a way that Eiichirō would have wanted.

"Step one: be born," Kiyotaka quipped with complete seriousness.

Eiichirō's expression immediately morphed to one of complete shock, as if he had just been struck by lightning.

"W-What?! T-That's it? There's no secret technique? No holy scriptures of maiden-conquering wisdom?"

Kiyotaka kept his same deadpan expression, staying silent. Meanwhile, Tsubasa let out a series of loud giggles before quickly attempting to stop her laughter, suddenly feeling embarrassed at how easy it was for her to get caught up in their antics.

Matsuo, who had immediately regretted walking in on this fiasco, pinched the bridge of his nose before issuing a warning to his son.

"Eiichirō, stop harassing our guest."

"But, Dad, you don't understand! This is an opportunity of a lifetime! I—"

"No."

"Aww, c'mon—"

"No."

Kiyotaka, upon seeing the father and son quarrel with one another,

sensed an opportunity to twist the knife further at Eiichirō's expense.

"You should just listen to your father, Eiichirō. Some things... just aren't teachable."

Hearing such a 'heartless' retort, Eiichirō dramatically fell to his knees in complete despair before faking tears of sorrow, acting as if the world was about to come to an end.

"Unfair... It's so unfair! Why is it when *I* talk to girls, I get ignored, but when *he* exists, they blush!?"

Tsubasa, who had only just recovered from her burst of giggles, turned red in an instant, stuttering out an entirely unconvincing explanation that was comically ironic.

"W-We're not blushing! You're just making a big deal out of nothing!"

Eiichirō dramatically pointed at Tsubasa's cheeks, as if his point could not have been made clearer.

"See!? This is what I mean. He exists, and they blush. This is clearly some other-worldly power!"

The back-and-forth responses proceeded, as the two continued bickering with one another.

Meanwhile, Matsuo, who was already nearing a collapse from his fatigue, decided to ignore their squabble, figuring that it wasn't worth the energy and moved towards his room to get some rest.

'Just another day in the Matsuo household.'

That was what Kiyotaka thought before walking up the stairs to Eiichirō's room, calling out to him with a sharp tone.

"I won't wait long. If you want your account boosted, now is your only chance."

The subtle threat ceased the bickering between Tsubasa and Eiichirō, as Eiichirō's rapid footsteps began closing in.

"Oh, right! Let's go!"

□□□□□□□ ✧ 🅜🅐🅒🅗🅘🅝🅐🅣🅘🅞🅝🅢 ✧ □□□□□□□

Location: Near Kawaguchi, Saitama

Timeline: 2012

In a more secluded area outside of Saitama, a gathering of people was being organised in an obscure, battered room within an abandoned warehouse.

The old, singular light bulb, flickered, casting elongated shadows against the weathered concrete walls that had begun cracking, revealing the individuals present in the dimly lit room.

Men and women were gathered around a creaky wooden table that had seen better days, their expressions a mixture of anger with hints of fear, and skin hardened by the countless number of resentful gazes that had pierced them in the past.

A gaunt man with a jagged scar slicing across his left eye stood at the head of the table, scanning the people before him with a sharp glint in his steely gaze.

"I know why each of you are here. I've listened to your stories—**every one of them**," the scarred man said, his voice low yet commanding.

"A family torn apart by **fabricated charges**," he said, looking at a young man whose fists were clenched.

"A close friend arrested for a murder **he did not commit**," he continued, glancing at a frowning man.

"A brother **falsely accused**, and a father **imprisoned without a trial**," the scarred man uttered, peeking at a woman with his right eye before pausing, letting the words sink in.

With a boisterous voice, he laid out the dark truth of their dire situation.

"The **media** paints us as **monsters** because they needed someone to

blame."

Nods and murmurs of agreement quickly took root before the scarred man continued, his voice rising with a palpable conviction.

"We came to this country seeking to make a peaceful living, only to have what we hold dear ripped away."

The man with the scar paused before taking a bolder stance, showcasing the depth of his creed.

"But enough hiding. Let us stand together as one and pay back their atrocities tenfold."

His words charged the dimly lit room with a sense of unity of shared experiences and a bloodthirsty desire for revenge.

Now reaching into his pockets, the scarred man pulled out a notebook.

"From this moment, let us cut off the shackles for which they bind to our names. Let us choose only what we choose to be and assume identities free of their false accusations."

His gaze met theirs. "I will be known as Scar."

The others quickly followed suit, starting with a man with a quiet demeanour but determined eyes. "Echo."

A woman with her resolve now ignited nodded. "Raven."

The process continued as each of the individuals gathered to assume a new name, a testament to the depth of their defiance against remaining silent.

Scar folded his bulky arms. "This is just the beginning. We will grow in the shadows to become a force that won't be able to be contested."

"But when the time comes, they will feel the pain just like we had."

In their minds, blood could only be paid with blood.

And they wouldn't hesitate to even the scale when given the opportunity.

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Hope you enjoyed the chapter!

V1 - Chapter 3: A Step Forward

Location: Imperial Palace, Tokyo

It was midday.

Bright rays of light streamed through the towering windows of the Imperial Palace, illuminating the figure of an older man appearing to be in his 40s, sitting in silence in a large study room, examining a series of documents.

The room was decorated with intricately carved wooden shelves home to centuries-old tomes and records of Japan's lineage.

Behind his seat was a skilfully painted portrait of the man, highlighting his once youthful, dark black hair and charming azure, blue eyes, that gave him a regal appearance befitting of a monarch.

Nevertheless, even in his 40s he had kept his rather handsome appearance despite the strands of grey that had started sprouting from his dome and the few wrinkles that came with age.

However, the weight that came with the title as Japan's Emperor had started to grow heavier. Not because of political responsibilities, for which the Imperial Family had forsaken decades ago, but because of what he had desperately protected for years: his family. Specifically, his youngest who he was the most protective of, **Hiyori**.

A polished wooden table stretched before him, supporting sheets of paper stamped with the seal of the **Imperial Household Agency (IHA)**, stipulating justifications for decreasing funds allocated to the members of the Imperial Family, as well as reductions in other parts of the budget such as security staffing.

'This is the third time in the past year... What is my brother thinking?'

His younger brother, **Issei**, holds the position of Director-General of the IHA, making him one of the most powerful bureaucrats in the country, primarily due to the vastness of connections that come with the title. He has direct authority and control of the IHA's operations, budget, and interactions with the central government.

The IHA receives funding from the **national budget** and distributes it across different divisions such as the Imperial family's personal allowance, palace maintenance and operations, security and staff salaries, and various other departments.

As the Emperor's gaze drifted downwards, he felt a surge of frustration course through his fingertips, causing him to slightly crinkle the piece of paper in his hand with a grip full of grit.

'Our family's allowance and security staffing funds has gone down but the budget for palace maintenance and construction has gone up again?'

Normally, this would make sense. Making sure that the palace was well maintained and secured was a top priority for the Emperor. He was well aware of the rising crime rates throughout Japan, and Tokyo was no exception.

Keeping the facilities and buildings around the palace and making additional security enhancements to reduce the need for human guards would be something that the Emperor would wholeheartedly agree with, given how protective he was of his daughter, especially. That, and the fact **rumours** of the Imperial Family hiding the existence of an Imperial Princess had begun spreading in the past couple years, was more than enough justification to only keep staff with absolute loyalty employed.

But it was the significant increase in construction costs involving renovations around the palace, as well as the new security facilities, that made the Emperor grind his teeth in irritation.

Not because they were all for the sake of protection, but rather because it was taking far too long with all the delays that had been issued over the past couple years. Those delays being the justifications to change how the IHA's budget is divided amongst the different sectors of the Imperial Palace.

He quickly calmed himself down, realising that there was no point in getting angry because his brother would always give the same reasons.

For example, one reason for the delays was that acquiring construction labourers that are highly skilled and do not wander off into areas that they aren't supposed to be in is difficult, especially with the reduction in security personnel—that would normally keep unwanted visitors out from the more sensitive internal areas of the Imperial Palace—to cater more funds for the construction efforts. At least, that was what his brother, Issei, had told him.

The Emperor had accepted these justifications that Issei had given, knowing that it was what was best for Hiyori, at least from his perspective as a very protective father. After all, he ensured that Hiyori was positioned as far away as possible from the area construction was occurring.

But the repeated use of the same excuse, or similar excuses, had sown seeds of doubt in his mind regarding his younger brother, Issei. Did he really have the Imperial Family's best interests at heart? Or was he moving with his own goals in mind?

The Emperor wasn't sure, but he didn't want to jump to conclusions. Issei was his blood. His younger brother who he had been closest to since childhood; the person that he trusted the most.

Issei had always supported him and the Imperial Family and never showed any resentment regarding Imperial Law, which stipulated that the eldest would inherit the throne.

Not only that, but he also had a very close relationship with Hiyori, often giving her gifts from the outside world as an uncle would, telling her countless stories when she was younger.

Hence, the Emperor firmly believed that Issei would not do anything to harm Hiyori or the Imperial Family, not consciously realising that the seeds of doubt had already started to take root in his stomach and would sprout dangerous thoughts in the future.

'It would probably be best if I had another word with him.'

He was about to continue along this train of thought, but the door to his study suddenly opened sharply.

At first, he was about to scold whichever insolent person had decided to walk into his private study unannounced, but his gaze softened slightly at the familiar sight of a long, silver haired, mature beauty.

With graceful steps, she stepped towards her husband, understanding and warmth in her light purple gaze.

"She was reading all night and this morning again, you know?" Her voice came out softly, soothing the tense atmosphere. "She just can't seem to get enough of those mystery novels. I caught her nose deep and asleep in the pages last night," she said with a light giggle.

The Emperor, sitting at his desk, did not immediately respond. His posture remained rigid, his brow furrowed as he continued to examine the pile of reports before him. He knew where this was going. They had had this discussion in the past and it wasn't one he particularly enjoyed, primarily because it centred around a promise he had made long ago, which he had now rescinded.

His lip tightened, and with a heavy sigh, he finally looked up at her.

"She's still confined to those books, then?" he murmured, his voice laced with concern, but also frustration. "You know how dangerous the outside world has become, especially after those recent incidents. The news outlets have been relentless with the details." His hands gripped the armrests of his chair, his eyes dark with worry.

Sayuri's expression softened, but there was a firmness in the way she held her posture. She took a step closer to him, her tone unwavering despite his resistance.

"Hiyori longs to see the outside world. Not out of rebellion, but out of curiosity. I can see it in her eyes, dear. She's not a child who runs from danger; she's a young woman who wants to understand the world past the words of pages she lives in."

Her voice dropped, a hint of sadness creeping in.

"Don't you see? She spends her days alone with nothing but those

books and the silence of this palace. I fear she is becoming as isolated as you are, surrounded by nothing but walls."

The Emperor's face darkened at the mention of his own solitude, causing his hand to tighten into a fist.

"And what, Sayuri? You want me to send her out onto the streets, now, like we had previously planned? Expose her to all manner of danger? You know how the media is painting the situation—crime rates rising, more and more Japanese families suffering tragic fates. The risk is too great, especially with that leak that had revealed her existence. I can only thank God that her personal details were not revealed."

His voice was firm, resolute, as though the very idea of change was something he couldn't entertain.

Sayuri held his gaze, the warmth of her voice not faltering, though a trace of steel entered it.

"You've sheltered her from the world for so long, Kenzou, and *we* had agreed that that would not be permanent. She deserves to form her own thoughts and opinions, not be governed by fear," she spoke firmly before immediately lowering her voice to something gentler.

"If you truly love her, you will not keep her locked away from the reality of what's out there, even if it's not what you want her to see."

Kenzou leaned back in his chair, his thoughts swirling. He understood his wife's concerns and knew she was upset that he had gone back on their promise they had made regarding Hiyori's inevitable exposure to the outside world during her teenage years.

However, even now, the fear of what could happen if he allowed his daughter to step beyond the palace walls gnawed at his insides.

His sons had also been sheltered during their early childhood, but had long since been exposed to the outside world, having already finished their education.

However, to Kenzou, Hiyori could not follow the same path as her brothers; she was different.

There were two reasons behind this sentiment.

First, despite Kenzou having the dominant alleles when it came to hair and eye colour—with both his sons, Kaito and Rikuto sharing his dark black hair and blue eyes—Hiyori had defied nature. She had inherited her mother's recessive characteristics, that being silver hair and purple eyes.

But that wasn't the primary reason she was special to Kenzou.

He believed she was far too pure hearted for this world, which is why he hadn't exposed her to the outside world using the same process he had implemented with his sons. This was primarily because the thought of her being hurt, or her innocence being tainted, brought forth a rage of an inferno in his heart.

Yet, at the same time, he knew that there would be day where she would want to leave her cage, which is why, letting her see the outside world during her teenage years was a proposal, from his wife, Sayuri, that he had begrudgingly agreed with.

However, the developing friction in Japan made him return to his overprotective ways, causing him to go back on his word.

He spoke more softly now, the tension in his voice palpable.

"I know. But even our finances are unstable now with even more budget cuts. Issei is still giving me the same reasons as he has before, and I don't know what to believe anymore. This palace feels like it's falling apart, and I can't... I can't risk Hiyori's safety on a whim even if goes against what I promised."

Sayuri's expression softened.

"I understand," she whispered. "But sometimes, Kenzou, safety comes at the cost of living. And our daughter deserves to live. She won't always be that little girl confined in the sunny world you want her to be in."

Kenzou didn't know why, but those last words resonated in his mind the most. Hiyori was already 15 years old this year and would be turning 16 next year.

All though she always gazed at him with love and warmth, the thought of her starting to resent him for not allowing her to see the outside world gripped him with a fear he hadn't felt before.

What if she no longer looked at him with the loving eyes of a daughter and rather ones full of hatred?

He knew that was logically impossible. Hiyori would never hold a grudge to that magnitude. But despite that, he couldn't help but still be scared; an irrational fear that had been growing with every passing day he kept Hiyori locked up within the palace walls, and the longing he had seen in her eyes.

There was no doubt that a father's love is as complex as it is fierce.

Seeing that her husband was slowly seeing reason, but still remained largely unmoved, Sayuri attempted to compromise with the man to try and make more progress.

"How about we split her exposure to the world in phases? Maybe we can let her meet someone her age from the outside who she can connect with first, and see how it goes from there," Sayuri suggested gently.

Kenzou, who had warmed up to the idea, albeit slightly, conceded his defiance, at least for now.

"Fine. But who exactly could we trust with such a thing?" Kenzou asked.

Sayuri's face turned slightly apprehensive. Getting through to her stubborn husband was her only goal and she had accomplished as such.

She had a suggestion in mind, but was worried of how her husband would react.

"Well... we could always talk to *that man*, he has a son Hiyori's age," Sayuri said with trepidation, silently praying that her husband would not go back to his old ways.

Kenzou, who was relatively sharp in the mind, immediately knew

who Sayuri was referring to, causing his face to morph into one of distaste.

"Absolutely not. Someone else, please. Anyone else but *that man*," he uttered with traces of venom in his voice, as if the thought of asking said man for a favour, and thereby being in his debt, was unacceptable.

Sayuri, who was expecting such a reaction, could not let her husband regress back into his rigid shell. He had promised her years ago that Hiyori would get to go out into the outside world during her teenage years and eventually attend *that* high school, where her safety would be guaranteed. Therefore, she had to keep pressing on with the advantage she held.

"And why not? Don't tell me you dislike *that man* because of the changes in the national budget? He did that for the sake of the youth and Japan's future, which is what he has always done and one of the major reasons he was appointed," Sayuri stated firmly, removing one of his escape routes.

Kenzou grimaced slightly with a trace of guilt at her words. He wouldn't admit that that was certainly a factor for his distaste of *that man*. From his perspective, the changes in the national budget, although for a worthy cause, was the reason why there was some financial troubles in the Imperial Palace.

However, that wasn't the major reason as to why he didn't like *that man*.

The truth was that Kenzou didn't really have a logical reason to dislike him. The reason of his aversion was born from something more... **primal**.

When he had first met that man, his instincts had warned him that those golden eyes portrayed to be kind, righteous and heroic by the media and the people, held something far more ominous deep within.

It was as if those eyes reflected a will that was **absolute**, and anyone who dared to oppose them would be cut down in an instant. That feeling made Kenzou wary of *that man* as well as distrustful.

At least, that was Kenzou's impression during the ceremony at the Imperial Palace following the last election, where he had carried out his duty as the Emperor to formally appoint the next Prime Minister who would take office. The few words they had exchanged at the time, although friendly on the surface, had caused a cold shiver to run down Kenzou's spine, especially when they had shaken hands.

Whilst Kenzou was lost in thought, Sayuri, after seeing her husband go quiet, decided to press forward to convince him, but this time with more care.

"Trust is a two-way street, dear. He opened his home to us, willingly revealing that he has a son who he has kept hidden away from the world and is of the same age as Hiyori. Don't you see? This could be a really good starting point for her."

Sayuri wasn't as naïve as Kenzou believed her to be. Her intuition also told her that there was more to *that man* then the media portrayed him as. But from a tactical standpoint, Sayuri believed that he had given away such a critical weakness without asking anything in return—well, aside from not revealing his son's existence to anyone, including even her own children. That same condition extended to Kenzou as well.

In her mind, neither could reveal the identity of the others child lest they risk exposing the identity of their own child. Therefore, it was in their own interest to keep this status quo. That was her impression and assessment because at the end of the day, as a mother and a parent, her obligation was to protect her family, not *that man's* family.

Which is why, only for Hiyori's sake, she would make such a proposal, because the only way Hiyori could see the outside world was if Kenzou agreed to it, and she had to make sure that he didn't relent, even if she herself didn't wholeheartedly trust *that man*.

Meanwhile, Kenzou, after hearing his wife's reasoning, begrudgingly agreed with her logic. *That man's* son had circumstances similar to his daughter, Hiyori, and a level of status that made it the least risky option.

Unfortunately for Sayuri, there was one thing that Kenzou, as a father, could not help but voice complaints with.

"But he's a boy! You know what they're like at that age, and I'll be damned if I give any boy an opportunity to lay his hands on my pure hearted, innocent daugh—"

His voice charged with anger quickly cowed after seeing that rare, cold gaze from Sayuri, which sent shivers done his spine.

"Kenzou. You better not finish that sentence."

"But—"

"No. I am tired of how overprotective both you, and our sons are of her."

"But—"

"No."

Kenzou's shoulders slumped, but before he could make a rebuttal, Sayuri let out a soft sigh.

"Dear... think of Hiyori. Don't you realise how happy she will be to meet someone from outside the palace walls? Even if it doesn't bloom into something of friendship, at least she will gain more experience talking to other kids her age. Please don't take that away from her," Sayuri pleaded with a softer tone, gently rubbing Kenzou's hand in an affectionate manner.

That sentiment immediately disarmed Kenzou's protests.

Deep down, he knew how happy his daughter would be because he too had seen her longing gazes towards the outside world. She didn't voice any complaints because it was in her nature to be very gentle and soft-spoken.

Imagining the girl's smile being as radiant as the sun warmed the father's heart, forcing him to reluctantly agree to set up a meeting with *that man*'s son and Hiyori.

"Fine... but their first meeting must be within the palace walls. That is non-negotiable." Kenzou stubbornly stated, crossing his arms to emphasise that it was a condition he wouldn't budge on.

A bright smile appeared on Sayuri's face, imagining her daughter's happiness once everything had been set in stone.

"Of course, darling. You made the right choice. I'll get in touch with him right away."

Sayuri walked away, the sound of her steps fading in the distance.

Now with only his thoughts left to occupy him, Kenzou felt a sudden ache in his head whilst imagining the reaction of his two elder sons once they inevitably heard the news.

'I hope Kaito and Rikuto don't create any more drama. I have enough problems to deal with.'

That was a hopeless wish because like Kenzou, their sons took after their father. Not just in appearance, but also in their attitude towards Hiyori: being excessively protective, albeit in different ways.

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"Let me get this straight. You are proposing to let a complete stranger into the palace gates. Someone who will then meet with our dear sister, the *imperial princess*—whose identity has been kept an absolute secret from the public—to try bond with her and eventually accompany her outside of the palace?"

A young man, with short black hair and piercing blue eyes, asked with a suspiciously calm tone that did nothing to hide the disapproval beneath his stoic appearance.

Sayuri, who had entered the chamber just moments ago to find her two sons seated, nodded firmly. It had been a couple days since she had made contact with *that man*, confirming the details around the scheduled visit.

"Yes, that's correct, Kaito. We—" Sayuri said delicately before being abruptly interrupted by a younger, more hot-headed individual, who

had a very close resemblance to the previous man.

"What!? Mother! You can't be serious! Have you not seen the news? The national crime rate is through the roof. It's far too dangerous for her to be out on the streets. Now is not the time to let her wander around like a lost puppy!" he exclaimed, no longer being able to hold back his temper.

Sayuri, in the face of her younger son's outburst, merely raised an eyebrow. She knew that out of her two sons, Rikuto 'blowing up' was an inevitable outcome. Thus, she kept her composure and began to patiently explain the situation in more detail.

"Rikuto, please calm down. It's not like I'm sending her out to a battlefield. It's just—"

However, Rikuto quickly cut her off again, standing up with his hands clenched tightly into fists, his voice rising in outrage.

"You're sending her out into a storm which she doesn't know how to navigate! What's next? You'll be signing her up for a front-row seat at a crime scene?"

Noticing Rikuto's increasing distress and defiance, Sayuri attempted to soothe his anger, softening her stance and tone.

"Rikuto, dear, please understand. Hiyori is already 15 years old. Taking this first step will be crucial for her development into a young woman and achieving her own independence. She needs exposure to the world beyond the palace walls if we want—"

But that did nothing to calm down her younger son, who only increased the magnitude of his defiance, throwing his hands up in frustration.

"But it's too dangerous out there! We control every inch of this place, and you want to let her outside? I bet she's going to end up chasing a bird or something, and someone's going to attack her!"

After hearing Rikuto's excessive paranoia, Sayuri's lips twitched slightly.

Although it is true that the national crime rate had skyrocketed during Miyako's term, and there were areas that were very dangerous in Japan, the way Rikuto was describing the climate gave the impression that Hiyori was a lamb being sent to a slaughterhouse, which was not true at all, at least from her perspective. She believed there were relatively more tame regions where crime wasn't as rampant as others.

She usually had a lot of patience when it came to her sons, but Rikuto was still acting so immature despite now being an adult at 18 years old, turning 19 years of age later in the year.

At that age, she had expected him to have at least some degree of control over his emotions, especially given that he was a young adult having already graduated from high school.

Yet, that was not the case, so she readied herself to take a firmer approach.

Kaito, meanwhile, had remained eerily calm. He had been following the conversation like he was watching a play unfold, but after witnessing her mother's eyes steel, he felt that this 'proposal' had already been set in stone rather than being a discussion.

"Mother," Kaito spoke slowly, "you've already decided, haven't you?"

Sayuri's gaze immediately snapped to Kaito, losing its edge ever so slightly before nodding her head in confirmation.

"What—"

Before Rikuto could express his fury, Kaito quickly covered his mouth, stopping him from lashing out.

"Rikuto, calm down. I'm sure Mother has thought this through," he stated calmly, but his eyes betrayed a deep annoyance with the whole situation. Even if he wasn't as expressive as his brother to display his strife, that did not mean he was on board with the idea completely.

Seeing that his brother had now calmed down, Rikuto removed his hand from his brother's mouth before proceeding to turn back to Sayuri, asking a more serious question that would determine his

stance on the matter.

"But if I may ask... Does this person, who Hiyori will meet, have any ties to the current political climate?"

Sayuri raised her chin a fraction to meet Kaito's blue gaze, slightly narrowing her light-purple eyes before speaking with a calculated vagueness.

"You need not worry about that. Their role is purely personal, serving as a bridge to connect Hiyori with the outside world and help her adjust."

Kaito nodded slowly. Given that he was oldest son at a ripe age of 20 years old, he was the next in line to receive the throne, thereby making him the Crown Prince.

Being the Crown Prince came with responsibilities, and one of them was keeping up with Japan's political climate, as well as maintaining connections with influential people.

Which is why, after hearing how sure his mother was that the person in question, who would meet Hiyori, was only visiting for personal reasons, her words lessened the weight of unease on his shoulders.

But he was curious about one thing.

"Why now, Mother? Why wasn't this plan executed before all the conflict now raging on the streets?"

Sayuri exhaled softly, priming herself to deliver the reality of the situation. The promise that she and her husband had made with regards to how they would 'handle' Hiyori's exposure to the real world.

"The truth is that both your father and I had agreed a long time ago to let Hiyori see the outside world when she turned 13, preparing her for when she would eventually enter high school."

After hearing that statement, Rikuto and Kaito expressions morphed into one of complete disbelief and confusion. They had never heard of this plan.

However, unlike Rikuto, Kaito was quick on the uptake, swiftly quizzing his mother for further details.

"If that is the case, then I'm assuming the rising number of crimes against Japanese citizens caused some friction between you two?"

Sayuri's eyes dimmed slightly, before a sad smile took over her face.

"Yes, that's correct. Your father and I... Well, we had a bit of a disagreement that ended up with that plan being 'pushed-back' for quite some time. You know how stubborn your father can be sometimes."

Hearing that, Kaito's face turned to one of understanding, deducing that his mother had likely been overruled by Kenzou. After all, Kaito knew how protective his father was of Hiyori.

Before he could ponder further, Sayuri broke him out of his thoughts, her once soft voice now rejuvenated with a tender firmness.

"But your father has seen reason, and he has given his blessing. So, I hope you both respect our wishes and understand that this is what is best for Hiyori. This year is the only time she has to prepare before she enters high school."

Rikuto, hearing that his father had already agreed, felt his shoulders slump slightly.

However, Kaito was different. There was still one critical question for which his mother, the Empress, had not given enough details on.

"I see. But, Mother, you still haven't provided us any details on who this 'someone' is going to be. You've been really vague. Can't you tell us more?" Kaito calmly asked.

Sayuri felt a wave of nervousness course through her body. Now that they had broached this particular topic, she knew she had to be careful with her words. Even if she did not know *that man's* true motives, it would not be a good idea to antagonise him by revealing information he had given to her and Kenzou in confidence. She believed keeping his trust now would be more beneficial in the future; it would be foolish to make such a man her enemy, at least

from her perspective.

"Rest assured, the child is from a prestigious family and understands his position well. He is around the same age as Hiyori and has also lived a sheltered life. So please, don't be too hard on him when he comes to the palace in a few weeks' time."

She hadn't met the boy in question, nor did she have many details regarding his past. However, she did know for a fact that he had been kept hidden away from the real world just like her daughter, Hiyori, had been, albeit not to the same extent as Hiyori. That was a detail that she was told by *that man*.

Whilst Sayuri was musing over her next steps, she failed to notice how the room had abruptly turned silent. Kaito and Rikuto remained frozen before a sharp, shared look passed between them.

Kaito's stoic appearance did not waver.

However, his grip on the edge of the table had dramatically tightened.

"A boy...?" he murmured to himself in complete disbelief, as a speck of rage started boiling within, but he kept it internalised.

On the other hand, Rikuto, who was somewhat calm just moments ago, quickly erupted in another fit of anger, this time more enraged than he had ever been.

"A boy!? You want her to get acquainted, alone, with a boy?! Oh, no. No way. Absolutely not. She's too young for that kind of... attention!" Rikuto shouted with a voice imbued with a palpable fury, evident by the veins now bulging in his forehead.

His outburst snapped Sayuri's attention back to her children, feeling a wave of Déjà vu hit her.

'Here we go again...'

It was going to be a long day for her.

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In another, more private corner of the Imperial Palace, a girl was humming a quiet tune whilst glancing at herself in the mirror, securing the final ribbon in her long, wavy, silver hair.

The nearby curtains from her bedside window were drawn back, giving way to the afternoon light that warmed her face and accentuated her delicate features, particularly the new vibrant glow of excitement in her light-purple eyes.

She would usually be cooped up in her private residence, reading books, but today was different. The change in circumstances had brought out her more adventurous side, which was why she was planning a little rendezvous to the more private section of the Imperial Garden. That, and the fact that the weather was clear today after a week of rain.

However, those details weren't what was on her mind at this instant.

'I'm really going to see the outside world!!'

Her mother had just informed her moments ago that in a few weeks' time, she would get to see the outside world, but that was not all.

'And I'll get to talk to someone my age! I wonder what they'll be like... Are conversations as natural as they seem in books? Or do the words tangle before they reach the air? Will I say something memorable, like the heroines I admire? Oh, I hope they're kind... I hope they like stories too.'

The numerous possibilities of what was to come made her lips turn wider, but at the same time a bundle of nerves and intrusive thoughts involuntarily entered.

'What if I don't know what to say? Or worse, what if I say too much and sound weird?'

Her heart sank as various other unpleasant thoughts, revolving around her deepest insecurities, took root, plunging her mind into a whirlwind of negativity.

The harshest fact, that she didn't want to confront, was her intrusive thoughts that had convinced her that there wasn't anything remotely interesting about her, other than her status as the Imperial Princess.

She had lived such a sheltered life, so, initially, she was excited at the thought of that changing.

However, change can be scary for some, especially for a girl who had only ever actively interacted with were her family and mainly read books in her abundance of spare time. It was understandable that she had mixed feelings about the change.

Nevertheless, going beyond the palace walls had been a silent desire she had had for quite some time, and she wasn't going to let her intrusive thoughts ruin her mood. Not today.

"No... I just need to stay positive. Everything will be okay, Hiyori," she said to her reflection in the mirror.

That was something her mother always told her when she was younger. She was one of the few people that understood her endless curiosity beyond her kind and polite appearance.

With the ribbon finally being tied, she took a deep breath before taking a step outside of her private residence, navigating the well-lit hallway with graceful steps against the palace's pristine and polished flooring.

'It's been a while since I saw them.'

With her thoughts now occupied on more positive things, the air suddenly felt lighter, as if sharing in her delight.

Her once elegant steps, befitting the prestige of holding the title as the Imperial Princess, now had a slight skip in them, as if her subconscious mind urged her to make haste.

The moment she emerged into the Imperial Gardens, the scent of fresh blossoms swiftly greeted her, mingling with the crisp afternoon air. Vibrant maple and cherry trees stood proudly in the distance, their petals fluttering with the wind.

However, the beauty of the Imperial Gardens wasn't what commanded her attention; it was the pristine pond that rested in the centre that held her gaze, glistening under the sun's caress, almost as if it were smiling at Hiyori's return.

Her pace increased as a warm smile coloured her face, and her light purple eyes sparkled with childlike delight.

In the midst of her bubbling excitement, a familiar voice called out.

"Oh my, Hiyori, you seem positively radiant today," one of the older attendants remarked, bowing slightly with a polite smile.

It was Saito, one of the elderly gardeners who had tended these grounds for decades and was close with her father, Kenzou. His eyes twinkled with kindness as he leaned on his rake.

"Does something special await you?" Another inquired.

Hiyori let out a few giggles, clasping her hands together. Although it's true that she actively talks to her family, she does occasionally interact with the staff within the Imperial Palace, some more than others.

She never flaunted her title as the Imperial Princess and was always polite and respectful to everyone regardless of their status, and told them only to address her by name. Her humbleness, politeness, and kindness, despite the prestige that came with her title, had gained a lot of adoration from the more veteran, loyal servants, who had maintained the Imperial Palace for many years.

"Perhaps," she said, her voice filled with a teasing lightness. "I just feel... free today."

Both of the elderly attendants exchanged glances with a tinge of confusion but said nothing more. They had seen the young princess grow up within these palace walls, her world shaped by books and the safety of tradition. It was rare to see her in such a buoyant mood, and they did not wish to spoil that.

Saito fished something out of his pocket, causing Hiyori's eyes to gleam with eagerness.

"Here, why don't you feed the Koi fishes? I'm sure they'll be happy to see you, given just how much food you *loved* to give them when you were younger," Saito teased lightly.

Hiyori's cheeks coloured red slightly in embarrassment, a small pout covering her smile.

"Mmm, I learned my lesson Saito-san! I won't be tempted by their cute expressions to give them more food than they need!"

Hiyori exclaimed, grabbing the pouch in a fluster and skipping towards the pond, but not before sincerely thanking him.

The Koi fish, upon sensing an external disturbance, immediately turned their attention to the source before swiftly moving towards the surface, clumping together in a frenzy, as if they were her admirers.

The shine of recognition in their eyes and the palpable enthusiasm in their expressions made Hiyori's smile that much wider.

"Aww... I missed you all too," Hiyori said tenderly, before carefully grabbing a few pellets from the pouch Saito had handed her, getting ready to feed them by hand, something which she had trained them for since she was a young child.

"Ehehe, that tickles. You all missed me that much, huh?"

She continued feeding them, which took quite some time since each of the Koi wanted to be individually fed by her hand.

After finishing the feeding, her eyes shifted to a nearby tree, a sudden hunger coursing through her body as she gazed upon the bright red glow of the fruits sprouting from its branches.

'Those look... yummy'

Without a second thought, she plucked the apple from the lowest branch, holding it up to the light to admire its perfection.

The apple's red skin was smooth and taut, and as she bit into it, a burst of sweetness filled her mouth. She closed her eyes momentarily to savour the simple pleasure before continuing her stroll deeper into the gardens.

She walked absentmindedly, her thoughts shifting back to a world

she would soon experience, clouding her senses by fantasies of the world beyond the palace walls. What lay beyond the borders of the palace walls? The stories she had read painted images of bustling cities, tranquil villages, and people from all walks of life.

However, it was those thoughts that had casted a shadow of tunnel vision, resulting in her barely noticing the shift in her surroundings.

The once familiar path had given way to an area she had never explored—an area that she was told not to enter when she was younger.

The perfectly trimmed hedges had become sparser, and the sound of attendants bustling about grew distant. It wasn't until she reached a narrow cobblestone pathway that she hesitated.

The air felt different—quieter, heavier, a testament to how much darker the open space was compared to other parts of the palace.

Before she could turn back, she collided with something firm, causing her to stumble back with a startled gasp escaping her lips, as she landed on her bottom with a light thump.

The apple in her hand she had been holding slipped from her grasp, rolling a short distance before coming to a stop. It's once shiny red skin now marred in dirt and other reside from the floor.

Glancing up, her light purple gaze was met with the figure of a man clad in construction gear.

His high visibility vest stood out starkly against the surrounding stone architecture, and his hard hat sat low on his dome, casting a shadow over his features.

"Oh, pardon me, little miss," he said, his voice was gruff yet light and easygoing with a touch of apology, holding out his hand in courtesy.

"Didn't see you there. Let me help you up."

There was nothing outwardly strange about his words, yet something about his tone set a small ripple of unease through her heart.

Still, she accepted his gesture of goodwill and took his gloved hands.

His grip was firm—perhaps a little *too* firm.

As she stood, she instinctively brushed dust from her garments before stealing a proper glance at the man, whose appearance had become slightly clearer after having stepped into the few rays of light while he was helping her up.

However, almost immediately, the man adjusted his hard hat, tilting it down marginally in an almost natural gesture—his features becoming harder to make out. He proceeded to move slightly to the side, out of the few rays of light from the already dark corridor, adjusting his position to be one with the surrounding shadows, as if it was his home.

She couldn't see his eyes, only the edge of his jawline and the smile plastered on his face that was seemingly too wide, causing a wave of hesitation to course through her body.

"I... I should be the one a-apologising," she said politely with a small stumble, instinctively taking a couple steps back.

"I-I didn't realise I had w-wandered this far."

The man let out a small chuckle whilst watching her movements carefully.

"That so? It happens. Easy to get lost when you're having fun, eh?"

Hiyori nodded hesitantly.

Something in her gut told her to leave immediately, but she didn't want to be rude.

However, despite the faint lighting, it was at that instant she noticed the small details, like the fact that his boots and gloves were spotless, too clean for someone working on a construction site and handling building materials.

Not only that, but why was he here in the first place? Construction was occurring on the other side of the palace, far away from this

area.

Similar thoughts caused her to take another few steps back, before narrowing her eyes.

Something about this wasn't right.

"Is... is there something you're hiding?" she asked tentatively, her voice barely above a whisper, though she didn't expect him to answer.

She wasn't even sure if she believed the question herself. It just felt like the thing she needed to ask.

The man did not respond immediately. Instead, he straightened up ever so slightly and continued smiling, but it was still too wide. Too controlled.

"No need to be so suspicious, miss. Just doing my job here. You'd be surprised how often people wander off into the wrong parts of the grounds with such little signage 'bout these places.

His voice conveyed nothing but sincerity, and his tone remained light-hearted despite its awkward gruffness.

But despite that sentiment, why did she feel differently? Why did she have a sinking feeling in her stomach that this was not just some coincidence—that there was something... **predatory**, behind his upturned lips?

Just as she was about to ponder further, the man continued speaking.

"Ah, but you must be excited. Today is quite a *special day*, isn't it?"

Hiyori froze.

Those words made goosebumps permeate throughout the surface of her skin, as a stream of cold shivers ran down her back.

Her once tentative thoughts were now circulating in a whirlwind of panic.

'W-W-What? Is he referring to that? H-How could he know about that?'

"E-Excuse me?" Hiyori stuttered, still reeling from his earlier words that implied something he should not know. The fact that they had been spoken with such familiarity, as if he knew her personally, only made her stomach tighten more.

Noticing her distress, the man was quick to reassure her.

"Ah, apologies if I have startled you," he said with a soft chuckle, scratching the back of his head, his voice seemingly warm and apologetic. "I was just talkin' about the weather. It's been so dreary lately with all that rain. But today—look at that!" The man pointed to the few openings of light in the dark hallway.

"So much clearer, almost like the sky's decided to give us a break."

Hiyori turned her head to where he was pointing without thinking, momentarily distracted by his observation.

It was true that the weather was quite good today, which is why the words that he had said to her would reassure anyone that he was just referring to the weather. After all, it had been raining heavily for the past week, a fact that Hiyori was all too aware of and was one of the reasons why she had left her private residence to visit the Imperial Gardens, wanting to see the Koi fish that she had missed dearly.

But even so, as she looked through the gap in the hallway, her instincts were telling her a different story. That his friendly words and gestures were too controlled... too calculated.

"Hiyori! There you are!"

Her ears perked up.

She recognised that voice. It was the voice of one of the servants she was closest to, likely sent to fetch her.

The sound of footsteps approached, and Hiyori instinctively turned toward the familiar voice, momentarily relieved by the interruption.

"Hiyori, what are you doing here, dear?"

Hiyori, caught off guard by her question, stammered slightly.

"I... I was just talking to—"

But the moment she looked back, her heart missed a beat.

The man—who had been standing only a few feet away—was gone.

There was no sound.

No sign of him leaving.

Only an eerie silence and the nearby shadows that had seemingly swallowed him whole.

Her gaze frantically swept over the place where he had been.

But there was nothing.

No trace of him.

Only the tainted apple resting on the floor that symbolised their earlier clash.

She stood frozen now, her breath now caught in her throat due to the lump of unease resting there.

Had she imagined it? Had he truly been there?

The more she thought about it, the more the whole interaction felt like a strange dream—**no, almost like a premonition of something darker**.

"Hiyori?" The servant's voice called again, much closer now, worry embedded in her voice. "Are you alright, dear?"

Hiyori, who was still shaken, hesitated for a brief moment before turning to face the servant, trying to push the unease down. "I... I'm fine. Just... I thought I had saw someone."

Hearing that, the servant's expression turned into worry. "Someone? Oh no, was it one of the construction workers?"

Hiyori, not expecting her to guess the source of her distress, felt her eyes widen slightly.

"Um, yes... I think so."

The servant grimaced. "Oh dear... Your father definitely won't be happy about this."

Hiyori blinked in confusion after having calmed down slightly. "...Why? Has... has this happened before?"

The servant nodded, looking away for a moment. "Yes... minor incidents in the past, but this is the first time they have wandered this far," she commented, concern etched over her face as she imagined the Emperor's reaction.

"But you know you shouldn't be here, right, sweetie?"

A look of guilt flashed in Hiyori's eyes, momentarily distracting her from the ominous encounter earlier.

"I—I'm sorry. I was too excited and didn't realise where I was going," Hiyori mumbled, her head hanging low.

Seeing her sincerity, the servant smiled gently.

"No harm done, dear. Thankfully, I was able to find you quickly with Saito-san's assistance because I'm sure you wouldn't want to lose time meeting your uncle!"

Hiyori's eyes widened into saucers as a smile began to overwrite her once gloomy expression.

"Uncle Issei? He's come to visit?" Hiyori chirped, her eyes brightening, looking at the servant with anticipation, seeking confirmation.

The servant giggled lightly seeing how quickly the girl's mood changed.

"Yes, sweetie. Now let's not keep him waiting. You know just how busy he is."

The duo moved away from the scene with Hiyori's chest now feeling lighter at the prospect of seeing her uncle again.

They had been close when she was young, but now he was always cooped up with work these days, rarely ever getting that chance to meet her uncle.

But as she followed her handmaiden back toward the main hall, she couldn't shake the feeling that someone—somewhere—was still watching her.

Even if her suspicions had slightly waned after realising it wasn't an isolated incident, a part of her couldn't help but wonder if there was something deeper at play.

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A/N: Hope you enjoyed the chapter!

V1 - Chapter 4: Control

Location: Tokyo

The afternoon sun hung lazily up in the sky, blazing down on an outdoor basketball court where two teenage boys stood, battling it out in a duel.

A group of girls were watching from a distance, seated on the grass under the shading of a Japanese maple tree. Their chatter a mixture of hushed gossip and excited whispers.

Amongst the mass, Tsubasa sat comfortably with her friends, resting her hand on her chin as her gaze flickered towards the court, subtly paying close attention to one of the boys in particular.

Meanwhile, on the court, the ball was in the taller boy's possession.

He casually bounced the ball between his hands, closely observing his opponent, who had now taken a defensive stance after having missed his sneaky attempt at scoring a three-point shot.

As always, the taller boy noticed that his opponent's legs were spread outwards, his feet firmly planted on the concrete, ready to pivot.

There was no doubt that it was a strong stance whilst in defence, but the taller boy knew it had its weaknesses, one of them being the fact that a wider stance made it difficult to react quickly to a change in direction or pace.

With smooth moments, the taller boy continued dribbling the ball from left to right, testing his opponent's defence. He watched his opponent's legs drift wider apart with each juggle of the ball between his hands, albeit only slightly with each switch.

'The gap isn't wide enough to try it yet.'

To compensate, the taller boy changed tactics, suddenly shifting away from slow dribbles to feign a drive to the left, aiming to surprise his opponent with his change in pace.

His opponent's eyes expanded momentarily, before quickly shifting his stance, his feet widening enough to anticipate the movement, not realising that he had played into the taller boy's hands.

'Perfect.'

At that instant, with his opponent's legs being just far enough apart, the taller boy took advantage of the sliver of an opening his opponent had provided.

With pinpoint accuracy, the taller boy launched the ball quickly—but with great control—through the gap between his opponent's legs.

However, before his opponent could react to the unexpected move, the taller boy had already long since calculated his next movements, quickly catching the ball and taking two steps to the right to execute a perfect layup.

The ball flew in the air with a seamless arc, swishing through the net with grace to win the match, adding to his numerous consecutive victories.

His opponent remained frozen in disbelief, caught off guard by the taller boy's unexpected manoeuvre and immaculate precision.

Before addressing him, he let out a frustrated laugh through bated breath, conveying a mixture of annoyance but also a tinge of admiration.

"Haah, seriously, Kiyotaka? You *really* had to do me like that? That's a straight up violation, dude."

In his mind, the move the taller boy, Kiyotaka, had performed should have been impossible, yet, Kiyotaka had pulled it off without breaking a sweat.

Kiyotaka, unlike his opponent, Eiichirō, who was still catching his breath, looked in peak condition with perfectly calm breathing, as if

they had not just been playing for hours.

"Well..." he said, picking up the dropped basketball before casually bouncing the ball towards the three-point line.

"If you so graciously provide me an opportunity like that," he continued, lazily aiming the basketball before shooting without looking.

"It would be rude not to take advantage, no?"

SWISH

Eiichirō's eyes widened comically at the splashing sound of the net. He couldn't believe how effortlessly Kiyotaka had scored another three-pointer.

But the moment they made eye-contact, he couldn't help but voice his grievances after seeing Kiyotaka's golden eyes coloured with mischief.

"Haah, you fucker. You just couldn't help yourself from rubbing salt into my wound, could you?"

Eiichirō remarked, now sitting on the grass nearby the court, trying to catch his breath after the countless number of strenuous one-on-one games he had played against Kiyotaka.

"I don't know what you mean."

Kiyotaka responded, picking up the ball again before dribbling back to the three-point line to make another shot.

SWISH

"Now I know you're messing with me," Eiichirō commented, wiping the sweat off his forehead before lifting himself from the ground.

With slow steps, he approached Kiyotaka—who was now sipping water from his drink bottle—and grabbed the fallen basketball on the ground nearby.

"Let's just stick to shooting some hoops. I've had enough of getting

destroyed."

With each step he took, Eiichirō dribbled the ball under his legs, slowly approaching the three-point line, aiming his next shot.

Kiyotaka, who had finished hydrating himself, suddenly raised an eyebrow, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Oh really? I thought you liked getting destroyed. I mean, those... What are they called again?"

He spoke loudly to the open air, pausing to feign a deep contemplation, before his voice took on a lower tone—a level that only Eiichirō would be able to hear.

"Ah, that's right, *'Eroge Games'*. I recall your type being suited towards more... *dominant* heroines."

Eiichirō, after having been reminded of the time when he was 'caught lacking' whilst playing an adult game on his desktop with a particularly *raunchy* scene on his screen, was distracted momentarily by Kiyotaka's unexpected jab, causing him to 'airball' his next shot.

But Eiichirō could care less about missing the net completely, as he turned back to Kiyotaka, eyes wide in horror.

"Dude! I thought we agreed we wouldn't talk of that day ever again!"

He said this, frantically looking around to see if anyone heard what Kiyotaka had just uttered without care in the world.

His dramatic reaction was primarily because he knew just how much Tsubasa's friends loved gossiping, and the thought of them hearing the truth that Kiyotaka had just uttered—despite the large distance between them—filled him with a sense of fear he hadn't felt before.

Kiyotaka, although being straight-faced, looked upwards as if he was thinking deeply about Eiichirō's plea for mercy.

"Well... That's true. But I'm pretty sure in that 'agreement' of ours, I said my silence comes with a price."

Eiichirō, having realised that it was useless to appeal to Kiyotaka's kindness—something which he believed that Kiyotaka lacked, at least at this moment—quickly came to the conclusion that he had to appeal to Kiyotaka's self-interests to protect his reputation.

"Okay, okay! I'll buy you some damn ice-cream. Just... please don't mention it again?"

"No promises," he remarked, opting to keep his blackmail material before picking up the basketball, that Eiichirō had just airballed, and taking another shot at the net.

SWISH

"You're an ass."

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Meanwhile, under the shade of the Japanese maple tree, Tsubasa and her friends were sat huddled together, excitedly chatting away, focussing on one person in particular.

"He is just unfairly cool," one of the girls sighed dreamingly, watching Kiyotaka casually bounce the ball before effortlessly sinking three pointers one after the other in the net. His steely gaze and undeniable focus whilst playing had an almost magnetic pull that commanded her attention.

"Seriously, right?" another gushed, her voice filled with amazement. "Look at him! It's like he never gets tired!"

"Right? It's like he's not even human," a third girl chimed in, her eyes sparkling with awe. "Tall, athletic, and..." she paused, studying his sharp facial features and golden eyes, which she thought were mesmerising, before adding, "...handsome."

"I swear, every time he takes a shot, it's like his whole body is just so..." one of the girls trailed off, her eyes glued to Kiyotaka as he

prepared to take a jump shot. His shirt rose ever so slightly as he pivoted, exposing his lower abdomen.

"Dreamy," she murmured, barely able to contain herself, as her cheeks began flushing with a mix of admiration and a hint of something else entirely.

Tsubasa, sitting slightly apart from the group, folded her arms tighter, trying to maintain her usual composure.

She'd seen this all before—her friends' growing fascination with Kiyotaka. They weren't the first to be drawn to him, but the longer they watched him, the more they seemed to fall under his spell.

'They've been watching him for weeks, and now they're acting like this is the first time they've seen him play!'

After hearing them openly swoon over the boy, Tsubasa could not hold back the scoff that escaped her lips.

"What's so different now? You guys were already paying attention to him before. Just admit you've always had your eyes on him."

The way Tsubasa had huffed out such a comment, with a never-seen-before edge of hostility, made the girls collectively share knowing glances, their eyes soon narrowing playfully onto Tsubasa.

"Awww, is someone a little jealous?" One of the girls teased, her eyes shining with mischief.

Tsubasa's cheeks immediately flushed red, quickly shaking her head in denial.

"W-What? N-no, it's just—nevermind."

The girls giggled at how easily flustered Tsubasa became, but before their teasing could devolve any further, another girl began with a new topic.

"He's pretty focussed when he's playing though, don't you think?"

Tsubasa exhaled deeply, relief flooding in after seeing that they were

leaving her alone, for now.

Her thoughts soon drifted towards the contents of their conversation.

'That's how he always is. When he's doing a task, he's completely serious, completely efficient.'

She had seen firsthand how Kiyotaka juggles his time between sports, video games with Eiichirō, and quietly working through his personal studies.

Even though he was homeschooled, she knew he was keeping up with a curriculum of a similar level to her senpais at school.

'I think his grades were in the high 70s to low 80s range. So, I know he doesn't slack when it comes to academics.'

One of the girls leaned back, suddenly pensive after hearing her friend's observation.

"I bet he doesn't even realize how much attention he's getting. He's the type that wouldn't notice, right?"

"Yeah," another added, rolling her eyes a bit before pouting. "He's too wrapped up in whatever he's doing to notice people watching him."

"Well, he's the type of guy that probably wouldn't even look at us," one girl added with a sigh, a hint of self-deprecation and longing in her tone. "I mean, we're juniors. He's a senpai. He's probably not interested in us at all."

Tsubasa bit her lip, trying to suppress the growing frustration in her chest. It was true, he was a senpai, and he was always focused on his own thing.

'Well... most of the time.'

But disregarding his playful teasing, she knew those facts better than anyone. Still, the idea that he was "out of their league" stung a little more than it should have.

"Well, it's a good thing he doesn't go to our school," another girl

mused. "I mean, can you imagine? He'd probably attract *every* girl there. It'd be a nightmare."

"Yeah," a third girl agreed with a sigh of relief. "It's probably a blessing in disguise. He's unattainable here, but if he were at our school? Competition would be an understatement."

Tsubasa rolled her eyes slightly, but deep down, a part of her felt the same sense of relief. Kiyotaka, unattainable as he was, belonged to a different world from their perspective. But that didn't stop the girls from fantasizing.

"That's the thing about him, though..." One of the girls turned back to the court, eyes glued to Kiyotaka as he made another flawless shot. "Hey, Tsubasa-chan, didn't you say he just started playing basketball, like, only really recently or something?"

"Yeah, I remember that too," the other added, eyes wide. "How is he so good already? It's like he's been playing for years."

Tsubasa couldn't help but confirm it. "It's true. He's only been playing for a little over a month, but it's like it comes naturally to him. Same with soccer, too. He picked that up just as quickly—no, I would say even faster than basketball. When they go out to practise, his shooting there is even more accurate and fast. I don't know how he does it."

The girls gawked at her confession.

"What? *Soccer* too?"

Tsubasa nodded, her voice slightly dry. "Yeah, I'm serious. I've never seen anyone learn a sport that fast. He's... different."

"Well, no wonder," one of the girls said with a laugh. "He's basically perfect. It's too bad he doesn't play for a team though", she sighed, now lost in thought with her chin resting on her palm, gazing longingly at the boy in question.

One of the girls—who had been quiet until now—suddenly perked up, her eyes glowing with excitement.

"What if we tried to get his attention? Like, what if we just called out to him?"

Tsubasa's ears perked up at the proposal, especially after hearing the girls all voice their agreement with hushed whispers and a few giggles.

One of them was already preparing to raise her voice, but before she could call out, something happened.

Kiyotaka, who had been momentarily looking down at his shoes after making a shot, suddenly turned his head.

His golden gaze locked on theirs, scanning the group for a brief moment.

And then, just as effortlessly as he'd always done, he flashed them a very small, yet devastatingly charming smile that made the air around the girls freeze and their brains short-circuit.

It was only for a moment, but it felt like time slowed down.

The smile wasn't flirtatious nor was it an invitation.

It was simply an acknowledgement.

A recognition from a senpai to his juniors that he had noticed them.

But in that instant, it made him seem even more distant, even more unreachable to the younger girls.

The girls stared in silence, slack-jawed, and, unable to process what had just happened.

Eventually, one of the girls broke the silence.

"He... he smiled at us?" she whispered, her voice shaky.

"That was just—wait—did anyone else see that?" another stammered, clearly flustered.

On the other hand, Tsubasa—after seeing their reactions—could only

think one thing.

'That baka... He's doing it again.'

It was getting worse now though. He was evolving into something more 'dangerous'—well, for her heart, at least.

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Back at the courts, Eiichirō, who had noticed what Kiyotaka had done, couldn't believe just how effortlessly Kiyotaka had left them speechless.

"You ladykiller..."

Kiyotaka, who had just executed a perfect jump shot, turned his head to Eiichirō.

"I don't know what you mean," he deadpanned—having returned to his normal stoic expression—before passing the ball to Eiichirō, who was just shaking his head with a small smile on his face.

Catching the ball, Eiichirō held it for a few seconds, his lips straightening before softly exhaling.

He began spinning the ball on his fingertip with a thoughtful expression.

"You ever think about how society is... super complicated?" Eiichirō asked before passing the ball back to Kiyotaka.

Kiyotaka arched an eyebrow, catching the ball and making another clean shot, as the ball sailed into the net with a perfect arc.

"That's specific."

Eiichirō ran forwards, grabbing the basketball, dribbling lazily back to the three-point line.

"Like, economics, policies, the power struggles of politicians... I've been thinking about that stuff a lot recently."

Kiyotaka gave him a flat look, as if he couldn't believe that Eiichirō, known for being laid back and unserious, was taking the initiative in learning more about such topics.

"Since when?"

Eiichirō coughed, attempting to cover up the true reason for his newfound interest in politics.

"...Since a while ago."

Unfortunately for him, Kiyotaka didn't need to think hard to figure it out.

"You only started thinking about politics because you saw me reading up on current events a couple days ago, didn't you?"

Eiichirō fumbled the ball, realising Kiyotaka had seen through his lies.

"N-No." He cleared his throat, attempting to recompose himself.

"I mean, sure, I *noticed* you were interested, and that *maybe* got me a little curious, but I have my own intellectual pursuits, you know?"

Eiichirō placed the ball down, grabbing his bottle of water to hydrate himself, not realising his impending doom.

Kiyotaka, who sensed an opportunity, couldn't resist taking another stab at him.

He took a few steps back, as if anticipating Eiichirō's reaction to his next words.

"Intellectual pursuits, huh? Does that include begging 2D girls to step on—"

PZZZT* *COUGH* *COUGH

Before Kiyotaka could even finish his sentence, Eiichirō immediately spat out his water, as he began breaking into a coughing fit, cutting off Kiyotaka's voice.

After recovering from his near-death experience from drowning, Eiichirō scowled at Kiyotaka.

"Dude! Not cool! I thought we hashed out a deal. I said I would buy you an ice cream!"

Kiyotaka, with no shred of guilt in his expression, shamelessly avoided any accountability.

"Well... that was a while ago. Interest is starting to rack up and collection time is approaching, so this alleged 'agreement' you claim has long since voided. As the collector, I decided some pressure is necessary, especially with those outrageous claims of yours. The new fee has tripled."

Eiichirō started fuming. How could someone be this shameless? And "outrageous claims"? Could he really see through him this easily? No, Eiichirō refused to give up.

"That was like 10 minutes ago! What kind of interest rates are those!?"

Unfortunately for Eiichirō, Kiyotaka wasn't one to fold when he held the advantage.

"I don't think you're in any position to complain. In fact, you're lucky it was me who caught you and not someone else."

Eiichirō's face paled slightly imagining a scenario where Tsubasa, or worse, Tsubasa's *friends* had caught him in the act.

If such a thing were to occur, he would never live down the allegations of being a 'a gross, masochistic pervert', a title he imagined them labelling him as.

There was no way he was going to risk such a thing.

"A-Ahem, yes, of course... you truly are a magnanimous Lord,

Kiyotaka."

But despite folding to the pressure, he still couldn't let Kiyotaka believe that he had been dabbling in politics because of Kiyotaka's interest in it.

The truth was that Eiichirō secretly looked up to Kiyotaka as a big brother figure. He didn't know why he did, but it just felt natural.

"But outrageous claims?" Eiichirō asked indignantly, attempting to mislead Kiyotaka by feigning offense. "What, I can't take an interest in politics? Maybe I want to be a conscious citizen or something."

Kiyotaka didn't look convinced. His blank, robotic expression drilled holes through Eiichirō, as he let the silence drag and the pressure compound.

Eiichiro finally cracked, letting out a loud groan, begrudgingly realising that there was no point in trying to deceive Kiyotaka, who always managed to see through him.

"Okay, fine! Maybe I just thought it'd be cool to know stuff that *you* know."

Kiyotaka let out a quiet breath. It wasn't quite a laugh, but it was close.

Eiichiro grumbled, bouncing the basketball once. "Man, I hate how you always make me admit stuff."

He shot the ball toward the hoop. It clanged off the rim.

Kiyotaka caught the rebound effortlessly, but his playful nature had vanished. He looked more sincere despite having a blank expression.

"If you're interested, then go ahead. What about politics do you want to talk about?"

Eiichirō, seeing that Kiyotaka was willing to share his knowledge, immediately brightened up, the corner of his lips turning upwards slightly.

Even when Kiyotaka poked fun at him, if Eiichirō had a genuine question, Kiyotaka answered.

And this time, there were a lot of things on his mind that he wanted to ask Kiyotaka about.

"Well, I read about a lot of things. Things like the Constitution, the National Diet, Cabinet, and the Courts, but I'm struggling to piece it all together and see the big picture. Could you tell me how they're all connected?"

Kiyotaka completed another shot.

SWISH

Eiichirō caught the rebound, holding the basketball under his right arm, looking slightly confused at Kiyotaka's silence. Did he finally reach the limits of Kiyotaka's knowledge?

The answer was no.

Kiyotaka wasn't ignoring him. He was actually determining the best way to explain everything in the *simplest* way possible.

His eyes quickly scanned the area before coming to stand still, spotting a piece of chalk on the floor and the traces of childish drawings on the concrete.

'Hm. One of the kids probably forgot to return it to the teacher. Well, it works in my favour.'

Picking up the chalk, Kiyotaka walked towards a nearby wall, gesturing at Eiichirō to follow him.

"I'll explain everything with an analogy. But keep in mind that it is a simplified interpretation."

Eiichirō's expression morphed into one of intrigue, as he moved to where Kiyotaka was standing.

"Alright, I'm listening."

Kiyotaka began sketching.

"Think of Japan's system of governance like a tree," he said, drawing a rough outline of one.

"Everything starts with the Constitution—" he shaded in the ground below, "—which is like the soil. It provides the foundation, shaping how everything grows, stipulating the 'supreme laws' that dictate how Japan will be governed. Without it, there is no tree, thus, no system of governance."

Eiichirō nodded along, acknowledging his words that seemed easy to follow so far. "Okay, yeah, makes sense so far."

Kiyotaka continued, sketching roots stretching into the soil. "The National Diet is the roots. It takes in what's needed—ideas, debates, votes—and turns them into laws and policies, just like roots absorb nutrients from the soil."

Eiichirō scratched his head but was slowly connecting the dots. "So, laws come from the roots, huh? What's next?"

Kiyotaka drew a thick trunk rising from the roots.

"The Cabinet, led by the Prime Minister, is the trunk. It supports the whole system and enforces the laws made by the Diet, just like the trunk of a tree transports nutrients to the branches and leaves."

Eiichirō's eyebrows furrowed. "Doesn't that make the Prime Minister the most powerful person in the country?"

"Yes and no," Kiyotaka said, sketching branches extending from the trunk.

"The Courts are the branches. Their reach stretches outwards, making sure everything follows the Constitution when prompted. If the National Diet or Cabinet tries to pass a law or policy that goes against the 'supreme laws' of the Constitution, the Courts, or rather, the Supreme Court, can step in and strike it down—just like how branches can reach back toward the roots for stability."

Eiichirō exhaled, shaking his head in amazement.

"Man, and here I thought the Prime Minister just ran things however he wanted."

Kiyotaka dusted the chalk off his fingers.

"The roots, trunk, and branches all work together to govern Japan. However, without good soil, the tree would wither before it ever had the chance to grow strong. Which means that in the end, the 'supreme laws' in the Constitution are critical."

Eiichirō gave a low whistle, amazed at how easily Kiyotaka had broken it all down in a rather simple fashion.

"That's actually kinda cool. Complicated, but cool. So, power is divided into three bodies rather than being concentrated."

Kiyotaka nodded slightly, his face neutral. "Exactly. The separation of powers prevents any one branch from becoming too strong. The simplest way to look at the three is to remember that the National Diet makes the laws, Cabinet enforces them, and the Courts ensure they comply with the Constitution."

Eiichirō tapped his chin, glancing between the chalk drawing and Kiyotaka. "But wait, doesn't the Prime Minister control the Cabinet? And the Cabinet runs the country, right? Wouldn't that mean the Prime Minister is still the most powerful person?"

"In theory, yes. The Prime Minister has a great deal of influence. He selects the ministers of the Cabinet and *directs* policy. However, his power is ultimately limited by the National Diet."

Eiichirō's brows furrowed. "How so?"

Kiyotaka pointed to the roots in his drawing. "First, the Prime Minister is chosen by the National Diet. If they don't support him, he can't do anything. Second, the House of Representatives can pass a vote of no confidence to remove him. If that happens, either the Cabinet resigns or the Prime Minister dissolves the House of Representatives and calls for a new election."

Eiichirō let out a low whistle.

"So, if enough people in the Diet get mad at him, they can kick him out? But the reverse is also true? He can give them the boot as well?"

Although a simplistic interpretation, its basis was overall correct, thus, Kiyotaka nodded.

"That's right. Also, depending on the context, the Prime Minister trying to force changes by dissolving the House of Representatives could fuel the opposition's criticism, which, in turn, could invite backlash from the public."

"I see..."

Eiichirō then looked back at the tree drawing, his gaze landing on the roots.

"So, the Diet is the most powerful then?"

"In a way," Kiyotaka said before continuing, "But even the Diet has its limits. The House of Representatives is the more powerful chamber since it has more authority over the shaping of policies. Their decision takes precedence when selecting the Prime Minister and passing legislation. However, there's also the House of Councillors."

Eiichirō crossed his arms. "Yeah, I read about that. They're the upper house, right?"

Kiyotaka nodded. "The House of Councillors has members who serve *fixed* six-year terms. Because only half of them are up for election every three years, their composition changes more slowly than the House of Representatives, who are elected every four years and don't serve fixed terms."

Eiichirō blinked. "Wait, so even though the Genesis Party won by a large majority in the last election, the House of Councillors could still be full of opposition members? Like say, from the Civic Party?"

"Exactly." Kiyotaka pointed to the tree again. "That's why, even though the Genesis Party holds a strong majority in the House of Representatives, they don't have full control over the House of Councillors. This makes it difficult to pass certain changes like the amendment to Article 9 talked about in the news."

A flicker of recognition flashed in Eiichirō's. "I heard about that. So that's why it's been stalled? Even though the Genesis Party is in power and tremendously favoured by the public?"

Kiyotaka nodded. "That, and there are divisions within the ruling party itself, at least that's what I've heard. Some of the younger politicians, though more talented, are also more idealistic. They want Japan to be politically independent but disagree with using military strength to achieve it. They believe there are better ways to secure Japan's future. As a result, a majority for the amendment has not been obtained in the House of Representatives either."

Eiichirō exhaled, rubbing the back of his head. "Man... and here I thought politics was just old guys yelling at each other on TV."

Kiyotaka gave him a look. "It's more than that."

Eiichirō snorted. "Yeah, I *kinda* got that." He then scratched his chin. "But if there's so much resistance, why are there so many people still supporting the amendment? I mean, all I can see is support for the amendment on social media."

"Probably because of the rising crime rate and violent hate crimes against Japanese citizens."

Eiichirō's expression soured.

"Right... it's been getting worse, huh? That whole thing with **Kobayashi Masaru** from the ruling party. I heard his entire family was murdered by a foreigner. Looks like they're going after even politicians now."

Kiyotaka leaned back slightly against the wall, watching as Eiichirō's mood shifted.

Eiichirō frowned, bouncing the basketball in his hand absentmindedly. "Y'know, I actually saw something the other day. Some guys were beating up a foreigner near the station. No one stepped in. Not even the police."

Kiyotaka remained silent, waiting for him to continue.

Eiichirō clicked his tongue. "I get that crime is rising, and yeah, some of it *is* because of foreigners, but blaming entire groups for the actions of a few? It's messed up."

Kiyotaka met his gaze, his expression unreadable but a flicker of curiosity remained hidden behind his golden eyes. "And what did you do?"

Eiichirō hesitated. "I... wanted to step in, but I knew I'd just get my ass kicked." He clenched his fists. "So I called the cops, but they barely did anything. They showed up late and just told the guy to go home."

But Eiichirō didn't stop there, he voiced the other grievances deep in his heart.

"What's worse is that it has spread to schools, especially my school. Some of the kids there are not Japanese and they're getting picked on, or worse, bullied and beaten up. The teachers are turning a blind eye to it as well."

He glanced at Kiyotaka, noticing that Kiyotaka had remained silent.

"I mean I get it. Some of those Japanese kids had lost their parents, but most of those kids from overseas... they're innocent. They didn't do anything wrong."

Silence hung between them for a moment.

Eiichirō sighed, looking to the sky. "I just feel like people are looking for someone to blame." He glanced at Kiyotaka again. "What do *you* think?"

Kiyotaka's face remained impassive. "It's complicated."

Eiichirō groaned. "Dude, *everything* is complicated."

Kiyotaka gave a slight shrug, effortlessly catching the basketball as Eiichirō passed it back. "Then you already understand."

Eiichirō rolled his eyes. "You're the worst, man."

Kiyotaka simply took another shot.

Eiichirō watched the basketball arc through the air before landing in the hoop.

SWISH

He caught the rebound, gripping the ball tightly as his brows furrowed in thought.

"So... the rising crime rate is making people more open to amending Article 9?"

Kiyotaka nodded. "That, and other security concerns."

Eiichirō spun the ball in his hands. "Like what?"

Kiyotaka crossed his arms, recalling another scandal still popular to this day. "For one, the missing military equipment."

Eiichirō's hands momentarily fumbled with the ball. "Oh, right. That whole mess with the ex-JSDF Director, what was his name... Ah! **Iwakura Genjirou**, I think it was."

Kiyotaka gave a small nod, paraphrasing what the media had reported.

"He was arrested for espionage and the illegal sale of military arms. No one knows where those weapons ended up. That includes military grade fully automatic rifles, explosives, and other classified equipment. Well, that last part is just speculation."

Eiichirō let out a low whistle. "Damn. I heard about that, but I didn't think it was *that* bad. So there's a bunch of military-grade equipment floating around and no one knows who has them?"

"That's the story," Kiyotaka responded carefully, glancing at Eiichirō's reaction.

Eiichirō ran a hand through his hair, exhaling. "And all this happened under Miyako's term, right? Since he was the one who appointed that guy?"

Kiyotaka nodded. "Miyako, as the previous Prime Minister, eased immigration restrictions and opened the country to more foreign workers, aiming to combat Japan's declining workforce."

Eiichirō scoffed. "Lemme guess—crime rates skyrocketed, and then *boom*, everything went to hell?"

Kiyotaka remained neutral, continuing to state what the media had cited.

"Crime increased significantly during Miyako's term, particularly in areas with a higher number of foreign workers. While the economic benefits of easing immigration were real, public perception shifted against it due to the rise in criminal activity and hate crimes. It wasn't helped by the fact that the missing military equipment scandal was also linked to this ordeal through a **foreign smuggling operation**."

Eiichirō's eyes widened.

"Wait... *what?* You mean that the military equipment wasn't just being sold domestically? It was an international operation with an international level of criminals?"

"Yes, it's a possibility that the news mentioned. But nothing is concrete. It doesn't help that the Public Security Intelligence Agency hasn't found anything meaningful since the incident. Their Director is under a lot of pressure from the lack of results."

Eiichirō leaned against the wall, crossing his arms.

"Okay, *now* I get why people are so panicked about security. I mean, we've got rising crime, missing weapons, and a government trying to figure out what to do next."

Kiyotaka picked up the chalk again and added a few storm clouds above the tree he had drawn.

"That's why the Article 9 amendment is being pushed forward. With Japan's security becoming more unstable, some believe it's time for the country to regain full military autonomy."

Eiichirō let out a long sigh, tossing the ball up before catching it again.

"Man... I can't even imagine the stress those guys in the government are under. I mean, with crime rising, missing weapons, and all that other mess, it's gotta be tough."

Kiyotaka remained silent, watching him.

Eiichirō suddenly grinned.

"But, y'know, at least we've got *him* in charge now."

Kiyotaka tilted his head slightly, feigning ignorance.

"Him?"

Eiichirō gave Kiyotaka a look.

"Come on, don't play dumb. The country's saviour: *Ayanokōji Atsuomi,* the *Prime Minister.* The guy's basically carrying the whole country on his back right now."

"That so?"

Eiichirō nodded enthusiastically.

"Hell yeah. Think about it—crime was outta control before he took over, but he's actually trying to crack down on it, unlike Miyako. And it's not just that. He's putting money where it *actually* matters. More funding for schools, better education programs, and even stuff to help families have more kids. That's huge, man."

Kiyotaka's lips twitched slightly, but it was not noticeable.

"So, you've been reading up on his policies?"

Eiichirō puffed out his chest.

"Damn right I have. You think I'm just blindly praising the guy? Nah, I did my research."

He started ticking off his fingers.

"One, he's subsidizing childcare, making it easier for families to afford raising kids. My Dad, even as a single parent, is benefiting from it. He's at home a lot more these days and isn't as stressed as he was in the past."

That was a sentiment that greatly resonated with Eiichirō. He had seen just how hard his father worked as butler to make ends meet. So, it was no surprise that the current Prime Minister's policies had garnered his admiration and increased his trust in the man.

"Two, he's pumping money into education, giving students better resources so that the next generation actually stands a chance. And three, he's tackling corruption. Do you know how much *extra* money has been pouring into government programs ever since he began cleaning house?"

Kiyotaka remained expressionless, deliberately playing dumb. He was already aware of the figures cited by the Ministry of Finance.

"Enlighten me."

Eiichirō smirked.

"Billions. Literal *billions* of yen that used to be lining the pockets of some old crooks in the central government. And where's all that money going now? Right back into society. It's actually kinda crazy."

"Sounds like you admire him."

"Who *doesn't*?" Eiichirō scoffed. "I mean, dude *risked his life* during the Day of Genesis to root out those shady bastards hiding in the government. If he hadn't, Naoe, Isomaru, and Ryosuke would still be out there doing God knows what. And don't even get me started on Ryosuke—that scumbag who was supposed to rot in his jailcell for a lifetime, *boom*, found dead in his cell. Wonder what happened there."

"A mystery, I'm sure."

Eiichirō shrugged.

"Either way, the country's in way better hands now. And the best part? Even though he has *recently* started supporting the Article 9

amendment, he's not forcing it through. He's actually respecting the democratic process."

For a country that had lived peacefully under democracy, it was no surprise that the current Prime Minister had received even more public support given that he wasn't abusing his power to take away their rights as Japanese citizens to vote.

Kiyotaka arched an eyebrow, interested in what Eiichirō had to say. "Oh?"

"Yeah," Eiichirō nodded. "He's always saying stuff like, 'The will of the people must be reflected in the decisions of the Diet,' or, 'It is not my place to dictate change, but to ensure the people's voices are heard through my decisions.' Man, he's good with words."

"I see."

Eiichirō clapped him on the shoulder.

"C'mon, you gotta admit, that's pretty damn cool."

Kiyotaka offered a neutral shrug.

"He certainly has a way with people."

Eiichirō grinned. "Damn right he does. Japan's lucky to have him."

Kiyotaka simply dribbled the ball before making another clean shot.

With the conversation now over, they continued shooting hoops.

Only the clinging of the rim and swishing of the net could be heard.

But after a few moments, Eiichirō broke the silence.

"Hey, thanks for explaining all that stuff from earlier to me, man. You're smarter than your grades show, you know."

Kiyotaka simply gave a nonchalant shrug.

"I wouldn't go that far. I'm just familiar with the subject. Though, with my grades, I would say I'm above average."

Eiichirō exhaled lightly, glancing at him for a moment longer.

"Maybe so... but you've got this vibe. Like someone who always knows what to do... It's kind of like—"

He hesitated, his mind catching up with his mouth, but the words slipped out anyway.

"...like having a big brother."

Feeling the words in the air made him wince slightly, as he silently prayed that Kiyotaka hadn't heard what he said. If he did, then there would be no end to Kiyotaka's banter, and he would forever hold this over his head.

He picked up the ball, taking a few steps back to line up another shot, preparing himself for his impending doom.

However, in the process of doing so, Eiichirō was too preoccupied to notice that at that moment, Kiyotaka's expression had changed and his movements had froze for a split second.

It was barely noticeable, even to anyone who would be closely observing his face. But that small slip carried a heavy weight, as fragments of memories from five years ago played back in his mind.

Memories of *that family*, and *her*.

"Ehehe, big brother Kiyo is super smart... and warm!"

"Yukari... don't latch onto his arm like a koala."

"Eh~? Are you jealous, Nami~?"

"N-No!"

Kiyotaka quickly regained his bearings and pushed those memories away, not letting them grab hold of him.

He couldn't let such words affect him—no, hold control over him. That was not allowed.

His voice was even now, but there was a slight teasing undertone when he spoke next.

"Big brother, huh?" he repeated, as if mulling over the words in his mind but pushing away the stinging feeling that came with it.

"I wouldn't call myself that... but I suppose I can't completely deny the comparison."

Eiichirō's worst nightmare had come true. He could feel the sickening smugness behind Kiyotaka's words, failing to notice what laid beyond them, as he felt his cheeks heat up in embarrassment.

"Ugh, why did I even say that..." he muttered under his breath.

"Don't airball," Kiyotaka taunted.

He did in fact airball the next shot.

"I hate you. I seriously do."

"No, you don't," Kiyotaka quipped, as the corner of his right lip turned upwards slightly.

"Because I'm your dear 'big brother', right?"

Seeing the small yet still evident shit eating smirk on Kiyotaka's face, Eiichirō could only think one thing.

'This son of a—'

□□□□□□□ ✧ [M][A][C][H][I][N][A][T][I][O][N][S] ✧ □□□□□□□

It was evening now and nightfall was approaching.

They had both long since left the courts and were back at the Matsuo household, sitting in the living room.

The television buzzed as a male newscaster popped up on the large screen. His voice was smooth and authoritative, filling the quiet room.

Meanwhile, Eiichirō sat cross-legged on the floor, his elbows resting

on his knees as he absentmindedly bounced a basketball in place.

Kiyotaka—who was leaning against a window frame with his arms crossed—stared outside of the window, listening from a distance without appearing to.

"—public schools across Japan continue to see rising graduation rates," the anchor reported. "The government's commitment to education reform has led to increased funding for infrastructure and student programs, ensuring a brighter future for the nation's youth."

Eiichirō let out a low whistle before grinning. "Guess all those cuts from other departments were worth it."

The segment transitioned smoothly, showing clips of bustling city streets and family-friendly commercials.

The screen cut to a press conference outside the Japan Self-Defence Forces headquarters.

A row of uniformed officers stood behind a podium where the new Director—who had been appointed two years ago—addressed a crowd of reporters. His posture was firm and expression unreadable.

"Director Shirogane, what are your thoughts on the missing military equipment? Are there any updates?" a reporter asked.

Kiyotaka's ears perked up at the name mentioned.

'Director Shirogane.'

A couple years ago, the media had reported that it was **Shirogane Hanzo**—previously a General in charge of overseeing the integration of defence technologies into the JSDF—who had uncovered the devious acts of the previous Director of the JSDF, Iwakura Genjirou.

At the time, the mountain of evidence presented against Iwakura could not be denied and, as a result, his conviction was swift.

To reward Shirogane for his righteous acts, the Minister of Defence had recommended and offered him the position as the new Director of the JSDF.

Kiyotaka's father, who had taken office, approved the proposal, which aligned with what people knew of the man: hiring people based on merit.

The public, although outraged that such a scandal had occurred, felt safer knowing that Shirogane had taken the mantle of leadership for the military.

Kiyotaka had seen that Shirogane had become a relatively well known and favoured public figure, occasionally giving interviews or attending late night talk shows.

On the screen, Shirogane's jaw tightened slightly, responding with a concerned tone.

"While the investigation remains under the jurisdiction of the Public Security Intelligence Agency, I must express and reiterate my concern over the potential threat to national security. The failure to recover these weapons is a growing risk that cannot be ignored."

The anchor's voice took over as the image shifted back to the news desk.

"The Public Security Intelligence Agency remains under scrutiny for its inability to locate the military equipment sold illegally both domestically and possibly internationally. Despite repeated requests for an update, the Director of the Public Security Intelligence Agency has not yet issued a comment or update on the matter for quite some time."

Eiichirō scoffed.

"It's like you said, Kiyotaka. It's no wonder they're under pressure. They'd rather keep quiet than admit they've got no idea what they're doing."

The news moved on, now displaying a shot of the Prime Minister standing behind a podium, addressing a packed room of officials.

Eiichirō quickly straightened up, leaning in slightly with almost sparkling eyes.

"In related news, the Prime Minister has increased his support of the amendment of Article 9, advocating for security reforms to address the concerning hate driven crimes that plagues Japan and it's citizens."

The display then played a snippet of the ending statement to his speech.

"As I said before, I had originally intended to remain neutral and mediate this conflict occurring in the Diet, but the criminal activity and threats to our national security is continuing to harm our citizens, and that is an outcome I can't stand for. Having said that, the amendment can only pass with the cooperation of the Diet, so I implore the Diet to reach a decision quickly. Lives are at stake."

Eiichirō's face morphed into one of distaste as he clicked his tongue in frustration.

"Tch. You're right again, Kiyotaka. Even the Prime Minister's hands are tied. The amendment can't be pushed through because the Diet can't reach a decision."

Kiyotaka's eyes flickered toward the screen, but his expression remained unreadable. He decided to remain quiet.

The television screen flickered, depicting the front of the National Diet building in Tokyo.

"Tensions are high in the Diet, as leading figures, like Nagumo Katsuyuki, from the pro-amendment faction, continue to push forward, increasing support for the amendment of Article 9. However, despite the recent *incident* involving the death of one of their members, resistance remains to be seen from the anti-amendment faction, leaving the motion for the proposed amendment at a stalemate."

Eiichirō eyes widened in recognition. "Hey, Kiyotaka," he said, still staring at the screen, "is this the division that you were talking about earlier? Is this why the Diet is so indecisive? Because two major factions are in disagreement?"

Kiyotaka, his eyes trained on the scenery beyond the window, responded with a simple, "Yes, that's right."

A small pause ensued. Eiichirō's expression shifted slightly, his eyebrows knitting.

In his mind, he couldn't understand why the National Diet could not reach a decision. It was evident that the public had a general consensus on the issue, but the same could not be said for the Diet.

Even the Prime Minister, who had been so adamant in remaining **neutral**, had changed gears and was urging the Diet to make the right decision and amend Article 9.

In Eiichirō's mind, the Prime Minister was able to compromise his own ideals for the sake of the safety of his citizens, which was one of the many things that Eiichirō deeply admired him for.

Yet, the National Diet, or more precisely, the anti-amendment faction, refused to concede their position.

Eiichirō frowned at that thought.

He soon broke the silence, now looking over his shoulder towards Kiyotaka, the basketball in his hand now sitting on his lap.

"You know, I've been thinking about our conversation from earlier. The system feels really inefficient with constantly needing the Diet's approval for everything, and I'm not the only one who thinks that as well. When we got back, I was browsing the internet on my phone and saw a lot of social media posts complaining about the Diet's indecisiveness. It's got to the point where people are seriously considering to start public protests outside the National Diet."

He let the silence hang for a moment before speaking again.

"And that's not all, I've even saw posts that talked about the Prime Minister taking charge and becoming a **supreme ruler** or something. It got me thinking..."

He trailed off, pausing briefly before speaking again.

"What if instead of power being divided... the Prime Minister could completely overrule the Diet?"

Kiyotaka's ears perked up at that hypothetical scenario, but he kept his face trained on the window, responding nonchalantly.

"Then the decision to amend Article 9 would have already passed. But that wouldn't be possible without rewriting the Constitution to reorganise the governmental structure to delegate more executive power to Cabinet."

Eiichirō looked intrigued by the idea.

"What would be required to rewrite the Constitution?"

A beat of silence ensued before Kiyotaka's head turned away from the window, his eyes now meeting Eiichirō's. It was a complicated question to answer because it had many variables to consider, so he tried to keep it as simple as possible.

"Well, first and foremost, you would need full backing and complete control of the military. Not only that, but if a peaceful transition of power is desired, then tremendous public support is a necessity. However, even so, the biggest obstacle is navigating the geopolitics of such a proposition. The shift in power, without a **significant cause**, would invite international backlash and possible foreign intervention."

Eiichirō looked visibly deflated.

"Figures. Well, the National Diet's motive—or rather, the anti-amendment faction's motive is obvious to me now. They will lose influence if the amendment does pass through."

Before the discussion could continue, the news anchor continued speaking, drawing Eiichirō's attention back to the television screen.

"And in other news, recent speculation has resurfaced regarding the Imperial Family's long-rumoured hidden princess. Despite the great deal of curiosity from the public, neither a name, age, nor a face has ever been revealed. While palace officials have remained silent, some wonder—will the world ever see the elusive daughter of the

Emperor?"

Eiichirō raised an eyebrow. "Wait, they're talking about that again? I thought that was just some weird conspiracy or something."

The screen transitioned to a shot of the Imperial Palace at night, lights glowing softly through the trees.

The anchor continued. "While official records have only recently acknowledged the existence of a daughter within the Imperial Family, no formal introduction has ever been made. Speculation remains as to why her identity has been kept a secret for so long, but one thing is certain—the mystery surrounding Japan's hidden princess continues to capture public intrigue."

Eiichirō let out a thoughtful hum, tossing the basketball up and catching it absentmindedly.

"Man... I dunno. If she's anything like the Empress, she's probably a beauty."

He trailed off, as his face resembled that of a person lost in the clouds.

Kiyotaka couldn't deny that there was a certain allure to Sayuri, the Empress. However, he had recognised that such sentiments were likely attributed to the influx of hormones due to him being in his prime teenage years.

But if Eiichirō was going to leave openings like this, it would be rude of him not to take advantage.

"Didn't know you were into little girls," Kiyotaka remarked offhandedly.

The basketball slipped from Eiichirō's fingers, hitting the floor with a dull thud.

"H-HUH?!" He snapped his head toward Kiyotaka, eyes wide with sheer horror. "What the hell, man?!"

Kiyotaka tilted his head slightly, his face unreadable, but there was a

telltale glint of amusement in his eyes.

"They've never actually confirmed her age, have they? For all you know, she could be in elementary school... or maybe even a preschooler."

Eiichirō paled. Being a masochist was one thing, but this was something else entirely.

"N-no, wait, that's not—I wasn't—damn it, I just meant she'd be elegant or something! Like refined! Not—!!"

Kiyotaka, as composed as ever, merely gave the slightest tilt of his lips. "Sure."

Eiichirō groaned into his hands. "You're evil. You know that?"

"Don't worry," Kiyotaka said, reaching for the basketball and lazily passing it back to him.

"Your secret is safe with me... loli-con."

Eiichirō caught the ball but scowled in return.

"I hate you so much."

The screen transitioned to another segment. But Kiyotaka had already heard everything he needed to.

Aside from him messing with Eiichirō, Eiichirō's reaction to the news —and the conversation they shared at the basketball courts regarding politics—gave him great insight into the perception of what the everyday person thought of Japan's political landscape at the moment.

Well, at least what they thought with the information fed to them.

Whether he believed anything of what he or Eiichirō said was not important to him. What was important was that the conversation had solidified a truth in his mind, one that still holds true to this day. A truth that had been weaponized throughout history, twisted to control narratives and shape reality.

People believed what they were told—so long as they heard it enough times.

History had long proven that perception was more powerful than fact.

Now leaving Eiichirō to his devices, just as Kiyotaka was about to head to enter his room, Matsuo stopped him.

"You have received a letter, Kiyotaka-sama," he said politely whilst holding out an envelope.

"Please read it as soon as you get a chance. It's urgent."

With that message given, Matsuo walked off back into the kitchen.

Having now entered his room, Kiyotaka plopped himself down on his bedside, taking the envelope and opening it slowly.

The message was nothing but a random assortment of numbers and letters.

But Kiyotaka knew that that wasn't the case.

He had long since learned how to decode cyphers and was quickly dissecting the meaning of the grouped characters.

As his eyes scanned the words, a subtle understanding began to form in his mind.

The pieces, scattered and elusive, started to click together.

The reason why he was here in this household became clearer, albeit only slightly.

He folded the letter and set it aside, his expression unchanged. But inside, the faintest sense of clarity settled over him.

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Hope you enjoyed the chapter!

There are a few names mentioned that I would recommend

keeping track of. If you are interested, skimming over the end of Volume 0 Chapter 4 may give you more insight.

V1 - Chapter 5: First Impressions

A/N: It's been a while since the last update. So, if you have forgotten details, I would recommend reviewing Chapter 3 of this volume before reading this chapter.

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Location: Imperial Household Agency, Tokyo

The sun had begun its descent, painting the large hexagonally shaped building in a vibrant orange hue, exposing the surrounding Japanese vegetation and stone statues of historical figures.

At the main entrance—next to the flagpole for which the Japanese flag proudly waved with the cool breeze—a bulky man, wearing high-visibility clothing, was stepping down a staircase, walking past four sturdy pillars with an aggressive pace.

He abruptly turned back to look at the building, his face scrunching up.

"Tch."

With the click of his tongue, he placed his safety hat back on his head, turning away.

"Fuckin' bureaucrats. Thinkin' they're tough shit in their fancy suits and ties."

The man growled, his steps long, decisive, and imbued with power.

"Tellin' me how to do my job."

Still striding, he fished out a pack of cigarettes from the back pocket

of his dirty jeans, lighting one as he moved. Each puff of smoke that escaped his lips relieved the tension in his muscles.

He stopped near a bench, exhaling loudly.

"Those damn morons. I told 'em not to wander off into places they shouldn't be."

He grumbled, taking another whiff.

Eventually, he threw the cigarette away, stepping on it with his dusty and muddied safety boots before leaving the scene.

In the distance, in one of the sets of paned windows above the main entrance, another man watched his retreating figure.

"Meatheads..."

Publicly, this man—still scowling at the view through the window—is regarded as an impressive individual with many achievements.

One of them was his swift rise to the position of Director-General of the Imperial Household Agency (IHA) in his early 30s—a feat that none of his predecessors could match.

He was an ambitious man driven to upholding the integrity and prestige of the Imperial Family, ensuring their safety and preservation for generations to come.

This was what people who didn't possess all the information believed.

Behind that façade was a calculating man, concealing the cunning behind his emerald eyes.

His public persona was nothing but a farce to hide the sinful deeds of the past and present.

Before the most recent election, this man, **Issei**—younger brother of the Emperor, Kenzou—had been slowly acquiring complete control of the IHA.

The method? Money.

Issei had been embezzling the government's funds for years. The extra cash allowed him to purchase loyalty and, by extension, control of the IHA.

At the time, the major political parties—that being the Citizens' Party and the Peace Party—were undergoing their usual disputes and struggle for power, leaving Issei free to continue his operations in peace.

That had been the status quo for years, and all was going well.

But such a thing could not last; the storm that was Genesis had ensured that.

Following that historical event, the new ruling Genesis Party obtained a dominant majority within the House of Representatives, completely reforging the Japanese political scene.

New policies, new government programs, a new national budget... and a new Prime Minister.

Such things, to his dismay, were not within his reach to meddle in or influence.

And, consequently, the sudden shifts had left his embezzlement operations vulnerable.

'The new Minister of Finance and Prime Minister... they had begun cleaning house.'

The duo, working side-by-side, uprooted corruption within the central government, exposing the crimes to the limelight.

Diet members guilty of embezzlement, misappropriation of funds and other crimes tried to escape—none succeeded.

Their ruthless effectiveness had sowed fear in the hearts of the deceitful.

Issei was no different. Using the same methods to skim from the new, more competent central government's funds was a risk far too great.

So, he waited. Patiently looking for the moment when the storm had run its course.

To his dismay, however, trouble would not leave him so quickly.

'The decrease in funding resulted in internal division within IHA.'

With the budget cuts and, by extension, loss of wealth came dissent—a derivative of greed.

It latched on, weaselling its way into the IHA, giving birth to a particularly concerning disease.

'A rival faction. To this day, they are still contesting my term as Director-General of the IHA.'

Ideally, he would like to classify them as a trivial issue, but that would mean lying to himself; there was no time for such pointless things.

Because this disease—no, this *cancer* had begun multiplying.

'Some of my very own supporters had forsaken me.'

Relationships established on mutual benefit last as long as both parties continue to provide benefits. Once they disappeared, all bets were off.

To stop the bleeding and maintain control, Issei knew he had to find a solution to substitute the decrease in cash flow.

Not just to buy the 'loyalty' of his supporters, which was critical, but to placate the other involved *third parties*, who had supported his ascension to Director-General of the IHA.

Becoming the Director-General at the youngest age in history was not a feat that could be done alone; the viscous power struggle at the time had ensured that.

Even with his former title as the Second Prince, Issei knew he wasn't powerful enough to navigate the IHA's internal politics alone.

As such, he had requested and received aid from some rather influential people within Japan. Without their support, becoming Director-General of the IHA was but the fantasy of a naïve child.

'It's only a matter of time before they come collecting on my debt...'

With that in mind, time was of the essence.

And luckily, a solution—albeit a temporary one—had come to light.

'Construction contracts.'

Issei had believed they were the best option to stabilise the cash flow. By citing that the Imperial Palace needed new security renovations and facilities—as well as other general reforms and extensions around the historical building—he could create a cause significant enough to acquire legitimate construction contracts.

'The rising crime rates, and hate crimes towards Japanese citizens worked in my favour.'

With that added justification, and knowing his brother's overprotective nature, Issei knew that they could be secured without arousing suspicion. Convincing his brother that they were for the purpose of tightening security around the palace helped with that.

He also cited the past incident in which the Imperial Princess's existence had been leaked as grounds to decrease the number of guards situated in the interior of the Imperial Palace, only keeping those who could be trusted without doubt.

The cut in staffing increased his earning potential, as well as bringing forth another *possible benefit*.

'A high-risk high reward strategy.'

Construction contracts were lucrative because he could delegate vast sums of money from the IHA budget to the contracts without raising too many eyeballs.

Coupled with the practical difficulties of carrying out construction around a place as important and historically significant as the

Imperial Palace, artificially inflating the costs for construction was an easy feat.

'Despite the reward, it is still a double-edged sword.'

Though he deemed his actions necessary, consequently, the changes of the budget within the IHA invited criticism from the rival faction that was contesting his control of the IHA. They weren't too happy that areas under their jurisdiction were not receiving adequate funding.

And this recent *incident* had only put him under even more pressure.

'That imbecile, whoever he was, just had to run into my niece, Hiyori.'

It wasn't as if it was an isolated incident.

Smoke breaks, lunch breaks, and downtime—all excuses from past cases where construction workers had wandered into places they shouldn't be.

With less interior security, it was an expected flow-on effect.

And that was precisely what Issei was secretly hoping for—the *possible benefit.*

'It had worked in my favour in the past, but now...'

Issei clicked his tongue, brushing his fingers through his dark hair in frustration. He had used the fact that those fools had wandered in the wrong place to delay the completion of construction, citing the need to acquire new, more 'trustworthy' labour—that was the *possible benefit.*

That justification had furthered his profits and bought himself more time—a resource he was quickly running out of.

But Hiyori being exposed to danger? That was not something he had calculated, especially since he, on behest of his brother's wishes and even his own, had arranged construction to be as far away from Hiyori as possible.

She always followed the rules, staying out of areas she shouldn't be in. Under that assumption, her ever encountering that danger was a possibility he hadn't entertained.

'It seems like I miscalculated.'

Consequently, during his most recent meeting with his brother, Kenzou, Issei had to spend a long-time convincing Kenzou that everything was under control.

And that was why—just moments ago—he had given a rather stern warning to one of the lead construction supervisors, telling him to get his subordinates in line or he would hold them personally accountable.

Issei exhaled softly.

'Delaying construction by citing the need for more reliable construction labour was not my only justification; it was just the most convenient and rewarding one. It allowed me to shape the IHA's budget to the way I wanted.'

It also bought him a valuable resource—time.

Time to think. Time to plan. Time to find a more *permanent* solution.

That was why he was content with them wandering into the wrong places despite the potential ramifications.

In any case, despite knowing of the drawbacks, Issei believed he didn't have many options to begin with.

The looming debt collectors in his mind, the bought loyalty of his followers to maintain control, the rival faction within the IHA contesting his position—all issues that could only be resolved through money.

With that reasoning, there was no real choice to be made.

But after the arduously long discussion he had with Kenzou the other day, Issei could see the glimmers of doubt starting to grow in his elder brother's eyes.

'The last thing I need is for my brother's trust in me to waver—not in these troubling times.'

He did have one variable in his favour, however.

'Hiyori.'

At the start, Issei did not think much of the girl. She was just a vessel to strengthen the trust between himself and Kenzou.

That trust was necessary because, although he publicly broadcasted his support of the Imperial Family, he was not always working in their interests.

The reason for this—even if he consciously denied it—was that deep down in his heart, he harboured a small resentment for his elder brother.

A distaste that had taken root because Imperial Law had stated that the eldest son of the Emperor would be designated as the Crown Prince and ascend as the next Emperor.

Living in his elder brother's shadow—that was the fate he was given. Not even being allowed the chance to compete for the succession of the throne.

Influence, the love of the people, a beautiful wife, and a loving family —all things that Kenzou was given and Issei desired.

But those things weren't nearly as important as the one thing that mattered to Issei the most.

'He always had our Father's attention.'

As a young child, Issei would have done anything to see his father's eyes twinkle at him like they did when they gazed upon his elder brother.

Obtaining the position of Director-General of the IHA at the youngest age in history was the fastest way to achieve that goal, even if that meant contracting assistance from people who would one day come to collect the debt he owed them.

And in the end, he had achieved that goal, along with the privileges that came with obtaining the title as Director-General of the IHA.

Having achieved that goal, though, he was now largely indifferent to his brother and the other members of the Imperial Family, even if he outwardly conveyed care and consideration.

Despite thinking this, Hiyori was different to Issei.

Once a mere vessel to maintain trust with his brother, now an existence he cared about to an extent.

'She's too innocent... too naïve.'

As a member of the Imperial Family, Issei believed being sharp and having a keen eye for current affairs was a necessity.

Deducing the motives of others was critical; Issei believed Hiyori lacked this skill.

Despite that, though, he found her demeanour a rare... yet welcome sight.

Issei, who surrounded himself with wicked people, saw her purity as refreshing, stirring a feeling of protectiveness within him. An unexplainable desire to shield her from deceitful people—like himself.

That was why he always looked out for her safety—keeping construction away from her was a small example of that.

Whenever he visited, he also tended spoil the girl with gifts.

Exotic pieces of literature—that can't be found in Japan and that he had obtained with his connections—or jewellery, as well as other things a girl might like.

Recalling this, he thought of their most recent encounter when he had visited the Imperial Palace.

'She was smiling ear to ear.'

Usually, this would be a welcome change for Issei. Hiyori's soft smile always left him with a sense of ease. A moment of peace amidst the problems that only seemed to grow.

Along this train of thought, he remembered his initial surprise when Hiyori had revealed what the source of her joy was.

'Meeting someone from outside the palace and seeing the outside world.'

For a moment, Issei wondered who his brother would entrust with such a thing, but ultimately decided it wasn't his concern.

Besides, there was a more troubling matter he had to ponder.

'Why hadn't my brother told me about this himself beforehand?'

Surely, before constructing such a plan, his brother would have informed him.

Issei was the Director-General of the IHA. One of his primary responsibilities was managing the affairs of the Imperial Family.

Yet Kenzou had failed to mention any of these plans until after he had already met with Hiyori.

Issei frowned.

'Has he already lost his trust in me?'

It was a concerning prospect for Issei.

His brother had always kept him up to date with developments and never delayed relaying information.

Had the circumstances changed?

'No. I'm overthinking this.'

There was still the chance that he was being paranoid, which wouldn't be out of the question, considering all the other problems threatening his sanity.

But if the flow of information had indeed stopped, he had to find an

alternative method as a contingency.

Information was power, after all.

'I should mobilise my spies to find out what's really going on in the Imperial Palace.'

Usually, this wouldn't have been a big deal for Issei, but the times had changed.

The appearance of the rival faction had decreased his supporters.

Consequently, the number of people he could trust had diminished.

Receiving free up-to-date information at the earliest convenience from his brother had been a luxury.

Since that was no longer the case, compromise was necessary.

And with that assertion, he turned back to his desk. His throat suddenly feeling parched.

'I need a drink.'

He poured himself a glass of alcohol before slumping down on his reclining chair, downing the spirits in one swoop.

But as the burning sensation in his throat simmered, the air quickly grew grim with his thoughts drifting back to his problems.

"Where did it all go wrong..."

He looked up at the ceiling for a moment, hoping it would reveal answers.

His eyes soon drifted downwards towards his desk, narrowing at the picture of a familiar face plastered on the front page of the newspaper.

A bitter scowl carved itself on his face.

"That's right... it was *that man*, the *Prime Minister*."

Gnashing his teeth, he gripped his glass tighter.

Had the Prime Minister been advised by his Finance Minister to redirect the IHA budget to fund the new government programs? Or was it his own idea?

Was it just a coincidence that the IHA's budget had decreased? Or was there a possibility that he was being targeted?

'No, that's just paranoia. I'm overthinking this.'

Issei reassured himself. The IHA wasn't the only agency that received a cut during the changes in the national budget. Other organisations had had their funding justifiably reduced to cater funds for the new government programs.

Even if he was being targeted, given the track record of the Prime Minister and the Finance Minister, he would already be behind bars by now if they had caught onto his trail.

So naturally, Issei believed that—at least for the time being—he was relatively safe from being caught by their discerning eyes.

But there was still something that irked him.

'Just what is he up to? Funding schools? Subsidising childcare? Enhancing the youth?'

He scoffed at those thoughts.

That seemingly heroic image and stainless record that the Prime Minister had made him grit his teeth.

Not for any logical reason, but rather for a belief he holds close to his heart.

'No one is clean in politics.'

Even if all evidence pointed to the contrary, he stubbornly refused to believe it.

He had once been a man with no blemishes on his conscience,

believing that through hard work and perseverance, his goals could be achieved.

But he had long since forgone this naivety.

Because unlike others, he had realised the hard way that to gain power in the IHA, one had to be ready to plunge their hands into filth, whilst others, who keep their hands clean, fall victim to the powerful.

In Issei's mind, politics is no different; it's all about maintaining control, using any means necessary to do so.

'That man must have done something similar.'

He refused to believe that someone could become so great whilst still wearing a halo above their head.

There had to be something lurking beneath that angelic and righteous mask. There had to be.

Issei clicked his tongue.

Contemplating the Prime Minister's true nature was not going to solve his problems. Time was running out, and those construction permits were not going to much longer.

'A solution... How do I rectify this?'

He spent a lot of time thinking in this chair, hoping to find an answer to his problems.

Nothing had been drafted yet—until it clicked.

Pieces, once scattered, slowly joined together, as a rather sinister idea took root in his mind.

'...An excursion to the outside world.'

He recalled what Hiyori had told him at their last meeting.

Her planned visit to the outside world—an action impossible in the

past.

But that was no longer the case; the Emperor himself had approved the plan.

She would be walking on streets endangered by the increased criminal activity, right?

It was the perfect environment to plot an *attack* guised as an *assassination attempt*, using it as a cause to increase the IHA's funding during discussions with the central government.

Although his brother's trust was wavering, if he could shift the blame to the central government—since they were the ones who cut their funding in the first place—he could retrieve the lost trust and gain his brother's support.

His brother, Kenzou, would never consider the possibility that he was behind the attack; his relationship with Hiyori ensured that.

And with the Emperor's backing and anger, acquiring additional funds for 'better security' would be much easier.

'If such a scandal came to light, the Genesis Party cannot afford to be tied to it.'

The Genesis Party would not be able to resist his demands, even if they were unfounded. Their squeaky-clean reputation would be under threat if they refused.

After all, the Imperial Family's influence was vast; twisting the narrative would not be difficult—no, with the Emperor on his side, it would be *inevitable.* That was Issei's perception.

'...This could work.'

The logistics would be complex, and it would require very careful planning and action, but if executed correctly, a lot of his money problems would disappear.

'!!!'

But he quickly discarded the scheme, horrified by the lengths his subconscious was willing to go to maintain power and control.

The fact that he even considered the possibility of putting Hiyori in harm's way disgusted him.

'No... I can't do that. There must be another way. There must be...'

At least, that was what he earnestly hoped.

□□□□□□□ ✧ [M][A][C][H][I][N][A][T][I][O][N][S] ✧ □□□□□□□

Location: Imperial Palace, Tokyo

It was morning.

Kiyotaka walked with an elegant grace. His posture straight and head held high, exuding a calm confidence.

He was dressed between a blend of formal and casual, his legs covered with dark tailored chinos, and his upper half hugged nicely by a simple, yet high-quality, button up white shirt with an open collar.

On top of that rested his dark-charcoal blazer, which, despite his relatively young age, was filled out by his lean stature.

His dark dress sneakers echoed with each step against the smooth pavement, disturbing the otherwise peaceful ambience. as the scenery of

It was clear his appearance matched what was known of his prestige: a son from a wealthy family.

But that identity was far from the truth. His true surname held the weight of the man who stood at the top of Japan.

As the young man inched closer to his destination, whilst passing the ordered trees and well-maintained greens, his thoughts wondered.

In the past, he had never really cared about the Imperial Family. There were more important things to investigate with his time in the

outside world.

But those circumstances had changed—he had stepped out of hibernation with his father's new decree.

His time spent 'experimenting' had come to an end; it was now time to apply what he had learned and pick the correct method to fulfill the objectives given.

'Perhaps a more friendly approach is suited.'

He glanced at his wristwatch—it read 9:50 am.

'10 minutes left.'

Surprisingly, they had not sent for an imperial guard to personally escort him to the venue.

Not only that, but he had also expected there to be more imperial guards: the number was lower than he had anticipated.

Were they really that short staffed?

Still walking, he noticed other details.

'Scaffolding?'

Construction tools, equipment, and labourers—all sticking out like sore thumbs.

Amongst aesthetic renovations to prolong the area's cultural significance, efforts to improve the Imperial Family's residence security infrastructure was evident.

For the time being, however, Kiyotaka noticed that the construction efforts to improve security had, inadvertently, created temporary weaknesses.

In other words, as long as construction remained incomplete, the perimeter was, in fact, **less secure** than it had been previously.

'Interesting.'

Less imperial guards: less security.

Yet, construction of new facilities to improve security.

'Hm. The IHA did receive a cut in funding due to the changes in the national budget.'

He wondered if the two were connected.

As he stepped through the wooden gates, the sound of splashing entered his ears.

'The water fountain.'

It was the landmark he was told to look out for.

'I'm early.'

Not like it was of any consequence to him. In fact, it worked in his favour: arriving early would make a good impression on the Imperial Family.

As he inched up the steps and passed through the open doors, he spotted four figures standing at the bottom of a grand staircase.

Three males and one female, each wearing clothing that matched their prestigious background.

'The Imperial Family.'

A normal person would have been nervous in the presence of these people.

But Kiyotaka was definitely not normal.

'Hmm?'

A young girl, with silver hair and purples eyes, was crouched on the top floor, watching him carefully.

'Is that her?' He pondered briefly.

With calm steps, he ignored the pressure of their inquisitive eyes and

inched closer.

Now only steps away, he bowed before them.

"It is an honour to stand before His Majesty the Emperor, Her Majesty the Empress, His Imperial Highness the Crown Prince, and His Highness the Second Prince."

Sayuri smiled softly in acknowledgement, but kept her purple gaze trained on the boy, as if she was peering into his soul.

On the other side of the spectrum, the two brothers, Kaito and Rikuto, kept their steely blue eyes on the boy, displeasure clear in their expressions.

The Emperor, Kenzou, exhaled softly, but kept his stance firm, nodding in appreciation.

"There is no need to be so formal, young man. Raise your head, as you are our guest."

His words were friendly at first glance, but a complete mismatch once Kiyotaka saw the lack of warmth beyond his eyes.

Anyone who knew how to read the room could tell that this rather formal greeting, although friendly on the surface, was anything but that.

This did not bother Kiyotaka, however. He had already expected as much, considering the information he was given and the role he had been assigned prior to this spectacle.

Meanwhile, on the second floor, between the gaps in the wooden guard rails, a young girl watched the scene unfold with careful attention.

Her light-purplish eyes gleamed with curiosity, clutching her book tighter to her chest without thinking.

Earlier this morning, she—the Imperial Princess, Hiyori—had visited the private section of the Imperial Library to get more books.

While returning with a book in hand—one that, ironically, she had read many times and was looking forward to rereading—her mother, Sayuri, had intercepted her.

She told Hiyori that today would be the day she might make a new friend and informed her that she should wait in the private section of the Imperial Library, as she will be meeting said person shortly.

Naturally, Hiyori was shocked at the suddenness of the news. But upon realising the implications, she 'secretly' followed her mother, not being able to hold herself back to get an early first impression. She had been earnestly waiting for this day, after all.

To her surprise, though, this fated person turned out to be a boy.

Based on her father's protective nature, she had expected it to be a girl: it seemed her prediction was wrong.

Regardless, it wasn't like that fact would change her feelings.

Whether it was a boy or girl, she would still have the same conflicted feelings.

Unlike other teenage girls, having never had friends her age, Hiyori wasn't attuned to the natural social dynamics between children her age, and that was probably the biggest hurdle for her to overcome.

She hoped that, through this meeting, she could at the very least come out of her shell, and maybe even make a friend—her first ever friend that wasn't a family member or part of the Imperial Palace's staff.

And so far, her first impression of the boy was rather good: he seemed to be polite and well mannered.

That wasn't the detail that captivated her the most, however.

It was his unshakable, golden eyes. They never wavered when faced with her father's oppressive gaze or her mother's beauty.

'He's not nervous at all...'

For a child not to show any discomfort in front of her father's tall stature, and her mother's discerning purple gaze, she was already intrigued.

As she was about to ponder further, on the ground floor, her older brother, Kaito, made his move.

Holding out his hand for a handshake, he introduced himself.

"I am Kaito. It's nice to meet you...?"

His gaze sharpened slightly, analysing the young man's face closely for an expression of a non-truth.

Kiyotaka, unbothered, took Kaito's hand in stride, ignoring the pressure of his grip.

"Kiyotaka. Likewise, Your Imperial Highness."

Kaito kept his smile, but it was strained.

"Just... Kaito is fine."

He stepped back, his hands now behind his back, rubbing over them gently.

But his eyes never left Kiyotaka. They remained poised—unsatisfied.

'Normal background, yet abnormal behaviour. What is it about this child?'

There wasn't an ounce of hesitation in him. Even when he attempted to disturb his temperament with a rather forceful handshake, this child, years younger than him, did not flinch.

'He has quite a strong grip as well.'

He thought this, recalling the way his hand had almost buckled in the boy's grasp.

Kaito had only wanted to gauge the boy's strength, but it seemed the boy took that as a greenlight to return the favour.

At the very least, Kaito understood that the boy's strength was

nothing to scoff at. And he didn't seem to be one to yield to pressure.

'In that way, I've obtained more information.'

Kaito was a cautious man. Even with his mother and father's reassurance that the child who would meet Hiyori was trustworthy, he still took it upon himself to investigate further.

To his dismay, there was nothing out of the ordinary. Just another child from a rather prestigious family who had underwent private tutelage his whole life.

But based on this interaction, he had decided to alter his assessment. Any normal child raised in a wealthy family, especially when in the presence of the Imperial Family, should have shown some sign of discomfort—this child had shown none.

'It would be best if I observed him a little longer.'

For now, Kaito remained neutral. Despite his personal feelings on letting a boy near his younger sister, he was capable of putting away those sentiments to examine the bigger picture.

Although Kaito had come to this meeting with the sole purpose of grasping what kind of person Kiyotaka was, there was another person who hadn't come with such productive intentions.

If Kaito was said to have a cool, calm and collected temperament, then his younger brother, Rikuto, was the direct opposite.

With charged steps, Rikuto approached Kiyotaka, holding out his hand to greet him the same way his brother had.

"I am Rikuto. Pleased to meet you, Kiyotaka."

Indifferent, Kiyotaka accepted his gesture. "As am I, Second Prince, Rikuto."

Rikuto's friendly tone matched the smile plastered on his face.

Yet, the malice burning in his eyes offset such sentiments.

As soon as their hands clasped together, Rikuto didn't hesitate for a second—he increased the pressure violently, as if he were trying to crush Kiyotaka's hand.

Even though his older brother had come to terms with the agreement of Hiyori talking to a boy, his immature self-had not.

Meanwhile, Hiyori, witnessing this from upstairs, furrowed her eyebrows.

Her brothers, especially Rikuto, were always like this. Always fussing over every little thing when it came to her safety or wellbeing.

'Why is he being so rough with him?!'

She let out a small huff, tempted to go downstairs and give her older brother a 'scolding'.

And she would have done just that—if it not for what her eyes bore witness too.

'...He's resisting?'

No changes. Just the same tranquil expression.

Back on the ground floor, Rikuto turned up the heat, gripping even harder.

But as he stole a glance at Kiyotaka, his eyebrow twitched and smirk faltered.

'This brat. He's stronger than he looks.'

Rikuto wasn't one to brag about his strength, but there was no denying that he had a rather well-defined physique with a decent amount of muscle mass.

Kiyotaka was at least a few years younger than him. So Rikuto believed he could easily subjugate the boy and engrave fear in the boy's heart, showing Kiyotaka what would happen if he dared to cross him, or Hiyori.

But seeing Kiyotaka's lacklustre reaction infuriated Rikuto.

'No matter. I'll just keep going till that blank expression of his cracks!'

Meanwhile, Kiyotaka calmly thought about how he should respond to such blatant hostility.

Unlike Kaito, Rikuto was far more hot-headed, practically wearing his true feelings on his sleeves.

So, with that in mind, what response would yield him the greatest benefits?

Responding with force, like he had with Kaito, was certainly an option.

But judging by the exasperated expression on Kaito's face, and the tired look on Kenzou's, this would be the wrong choice.

He could of course act like Rikuto was actually hurting him.

But in the long term, this was not the correct choice either; showing any form of deception would make them more distrustful.

As such, remaining pacifistic was the correct choice.

If he remained passive even in the face of misplaced aggression, it would win him more favour with the other Imperial Family members: that was Kiyotaka's perception.

And as expected, the Emperor soon broke the tense silence.

"Enough, Rikuto."

In the process of stopping his son, he stole a glance at Kiyotaka.

A glimmer of respect shone in his blue eyes. The iciness they once held had waned to something a little warmer.

Despite the age gap, the young man didn't fold in the face of Rikuto's strength. And when faced with such disrespect, the boy remained calm and collected, unlike his short-tempered son.

Witnessing that, and knowing the boy's background, Kenzou felt a little more at ease trusting him around Hiyori, respecting the composure the boy had shown.

'He really is that man's son. Those resolute eyes.'

Even if Kenzou was not fond of *that man*, he could not deny the fact that he had raised a rather impressive son.

Rikuto, however, wasn't happy his father had stepped in. He was even more pissed that the boy had resisted his assault.

But if there was one thing that cowed him, it was his father.

Rikuto respected his father deeply, and if his father asked him for something, he would do it without hesitation. Whether that was a good or bad thing was another matter.

Grumbling, Rikuto took a few steps back.

Hiyori, watching from a distance, smiled faintly.

She didn't know why, but the heaviness in her chest went away, and the prospect of talking to the young man didn't seem as difficult as it did moments ago. In fact, she was even more curious to talk to him—to unravel the mystery surrounding him.

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The 'pleasantries', for the most part, had concluded.

Sayuri, glanced at Kiyotaka, smiling at him gently.

"You can meet our daughter now. She should be sitting in the private section of the Imperial Library."

She pointed to some signage in the distance that would help him navigate the area.

Hiyori, after hearing her mother's declaration, froze.

'E-Eh?'

In her excitement, Hiyori hadn't thought about what would happen after introductions had ceased.

Shooting up from her crouched position, her book in hand, she quickly dusted off her light blue dress and readjusted her light, off white cardigan.

To her dismay, her legs—covered by black tights and having been in such an awkward position for so long—were 'asleep'.

A small pout formed on her lips.

'Pins and needles!! Why now of all times!?'

Impatiently, she waited for the tingling sensation to fade.

After seeing everybody vacate the premises, and a few questionable steps, she moved down the stairs quickly.

With haste, she navigated a different path—determination coursing through her veins.

And not too long after, the grand, wooden doors to the library were in sight.

She sighed a breath of relief.

'Just a few more steps and—'

"That's quite the unique route to the library, *Princess*."

A deep, playful voice emerged from behind her, stopping Hiyori in her tracks.

Slowly, yet hesitantly, she turned her head away from the nearby bench and glanced at the speaker, finding his voice to be familiar in the worst way possible.

Her eyes widened in horror.

'No... No!! I was supposed to reach first!!'

A light brown haired young man—the same one she had been

watching intently moments prior—stood behind her, his expression unreadable.

Yet, as she peered into his golden eyes, a twinkle of mischief flickered within them.

She didn't know why, but the sight made a shiver run down her back.

Clutching her book tighter to her chest, she cleared her throat, attempting to regain her composure.

"R-Route?" she echoed. "I d-don't know what you mean. I just... stepped out for a moment!" She yelped, the pitch of her voice skyrocketing with each stumble.

Regret immediately flooded her insides, and she wanted to mentally facepalm. Was this really going to be her first words to someone her age? She was already making a fool of herself!

The young man, Kiyotaka, raised an eyebrow.

"Stepped out?" Kiyotaka asked, egging her on.

"Y-Yes!" she squeaked. "I was, um... feeling a little restless!"

"Restless..."

"Yes," she confirmed again, nodding repeatedly.

There was a moment of silence before Kiyotaka continued probing.

"You *stepped* out," Kiyotaka repeated, drawing out key words to highlight his suspicions, "from the private Imperial Library, where you were *supposed* to be waiting for me."

"Uh-huh," Hiyori nodded again, avoiding his discerning gaze that was starting to pierce holes through her story.

"Yet," he continued, "rather than waiting *just outside* the library doors, you ended up all the way... over here."

Hiyori's cheeks grew red with embarrassment. He was seeing through

her attempt at deception effortlessly.

'Oh god! What do I do? S-Should I give up? No! I've come too far!'

After that quick moment of panic, she responded in the most convincing way possible.

"Y-Yes?"

Kiyotaka glanced at the stone pathway behind her before redirecting his gaze back to her and then back to the pathway again.

"You came from the west wing."

Hiyori stiffened.

"Which," he added, "is in the opposite direction of the library."

"U-Um..."

A tiny bead of sweat trailed down Hiyori's cheek.

"T-That's because—" she scrambled for an explanation, eyes darting around. "I... I took the *scenic* route!"

"The scenic route."

"Yes!" she perked up as if she had convinced herself. "I wanted to appreciate the beauty of the palace grounds before returning to my reading!"

Kiyotaka's gaze flickered to the library entrance—not ten steps away from them—before returning to her.

"Then why were you running?" He asked.

Hiyori choked.

"I-I wasn't running!" she quickly corrected. "I was... briskly walking! A healthy pace is good for blood circulation!"

"I see. And what about the way you were crouched on the second floor? Was that also for good *blood circulation*?"

Hiyori gasped, her face now an atomic shade of red.

"Y-You *saw* that?!"

"Not at first." He lied. "But that confirms it."

Hiyori's felt like her soul had left her body.

Her hands gripped her book tighter to her chest, as if it were a shield to protect her from his sharp words.

"T-That was—uh—an *exercise*!" she stammered. "Yes! A reflex exercise! It's important to keep oneself agile!"

"Agile."

"Yes!"

Kiyotaka glanced at her dress, cardigan, and black tights—not exactly ideal for agility training.

"So... you crouched *behind* the balcony," he repeated slowly, "as *exercise*."

Hiyori bobbed her head rapidly. "E-Exactly!"

"Then why did you freeze when your mother mentioned the library?"

Hiyori flinched before hiding her face behind her book.

Kiyotaka simply stared, waiting for her next move.

Her lips wobbled.

Her eyes, peering just above the top, shook.

Finally, she let out a defeated sigh, avoiding his gaze as her voice turned even softer.

"...You're *mean*," she mumbled into the book, puffing her cheeks out.

Kiyotaka blinked. "...I am?"

"Yes!" She pouted, expression indignant. "You're poking holes in everything I say!"

"I'm simply clarifying your story," he replied, completely unbothered by her whining.

"It's *rude*!"

"Is it?"

"It *is*! A gentleman would let a lady *get away* with such things!"

'Well, that's what they do in books! He should be gentler and not so mean!'

"...I see."

"Hmph." Hiyori huffed again, her cheeks puffing up even more, almost like a blowfish.

But at that moment, she felt a strange lightness in her chest. What was this feeling? Was this the feeling the characters in her books had when they had a genuine conversation, even if it was nonsensical?

'It feels nice...'

All those earlier doubts and insecurities were slowly pushed back. Even if it was a strange first chat with a person her age, she found the interaction rather enjoyable.

'B-But now what?'

There was an awkward silence—the killer of conversations.

How was she supposed to navigate this? This was her first ever conversation with someone her age, so she had no idea what to do now.

Her awkward and quiet nature—derived from years of isolation—quickly crept in as she averted her gaze again, shifting uncomfortably with the book still clutched tightly to her chest.

Just as uncertainty had begun to torment her innocent heart, Kiyotaka's measured voice cut through the silence.

"So... you like Philip Marlowe?" Kiyotaka asked, glancing at the book in her hand.

Hiyori's purple eyes widened in a mixture of shock and something else that started bubbling within.

"Y-You *know* him?" she asked, voice filled with unrestrained excitement.

Kiyotaka, slightly taken aback by the rapid shift in her tone, nodded slowly.

It was as if a switch had been flicked, the sudden change in her demeanour was like night and day.

"I've read *Farewell, My Lovely* before."

For a brief moment, Hiyori just stared at him—then, her entire expression lit up like a light bulb, her smile seemingly brighter than the sun.

"Really?!? That's amazing!!"

She clasped the book to her chest even tighter, rocking slightly on her heels.

"I don't know many people who have! Well... um, I don't know anyone who has, actually... B-But his writing style is so distinct, isn't it? The way he describes things, it's like poetry, but with that sharp, witty edge!"

Her words spilled out like a rushing stream, enthusiasm bubbling to the surface.

"And Marlowe! He's so fascinating as a character! He's not like the typical noble hero, but he has his own sense of justice, even when the world around him is falling apart!"

She beamed up at Kiyotaka, pure, infectious joy radiating off her.

"Oh, oh! Do you have a favourite line? I think mine is—"

However, at that moment, Hiyori stopped herself, realising she might have gotten carried away.

Her expression dimmed slightly, eyes now downcast.

"U-Um... Sorry... I didn't mean to get carried away. I hope I haven't troubled you," she murmured softly but loud enough for Kiyotaka to hear.

'Look what you've done, Hiyori. He probably thinks you're weird now!'

This was her one chance where she could have made a friend, but now she was convinced she had blown it.

The immeasurable happiness at finding someone who shares her interest in literature, particularly her favourite novel, "Farewell, My Lovely," led to her getting carried away with her excitement.

She could feel the dams behind her eyes about to break, threatening to overflow as various thoughts began plaguing her mind.

Sure, she had been shy and nervous at the start, but she had remained optimistic ever since the news had arrived that she would get to meet someone her age.

'Oh god. Don't cry now. Not in front of him.'

Just as she thought her intrusive thoughts were going to get the best of her, a voice snapped her out of her poisonous thoughts.

"You weren't."

His expression remained neutral, but it had a softer edge to it, as if there was a hint of gentleness and sincerity for which he rarely used.

"I was surprised at first. But seeing your excitement... it was honestly a breath of fresh air."

There were no lies in his words.

Hearing that, Hiyori's gloomy expression vanished.

She felt a sudden warmth that reignited the light in her eyes and brought a new tenderness to her smile, as she hugged her book tighter.

"...Thank you, Kiyotaka-kun."

She felt like she had made a meaningful connection, like she had been *accepted.* And that left a lingering warmth in her chest.

"Oh? So you do know my name then, *Princess*? That's strange. I don't recall introducing myself to you, though."

Hiyori cheeks flushed a vibrant crimson. She was perceptive enough understand that he was back to teasing her again.

"E-Eh? U-Um, I—"

Wait, was he smirking? For some reason, she didn't like seeing what she now dubbed as his 'smug' expression.

She cut herself of as realisation settled in. It dawned on her that he was still calling her Princess.

And that was unacceptable for her.

"W-Wait! Stop calling me P-Princess! I have a name, it's Hiyori!"

"I don't know... *Princess* has a really nice ring to it."

For reasons he didn't fully understand, he found it greatly amusing to mess with this girl.

Hiyori puffed up her cheeks again, crossing her arms and looking away. "Meanie."

"It's unbecoming for some of your status to act such a way, *Princess*."

Hiyori's pout deepened. "S-Stop calling me that!"

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Meanwhile in the distance, hidden behind some nearby shrubs, two young men, with dark black hair and icy blue eyes, gazed upon the two with great scrutiny—well, mainly one of them.

"See! What did I tell you, brother? He's seducing her! Look at her—she's all red in the face! I really wish I had broken his hands now." Rikuto said through gritted teeth, his fists clenched tightly.

Kaito just rolled his eyes.

Unlike Rikuto, who was too busy seething with rage, he remained stoic.

Kaito had agreed to watch over them just as a precaution, hoping to observe the boy's behaviour around his sister when unsupervised.

Based on everything so far, however, it was clear that they were getting along well.

"Calm down, brother. It's just friendly banter."

Hearing his brother's reassuring words, Rikuto attempted to calm himself down.

But not too long after, his face scrunched up into an ugly expression.

"Banter? You call that banter!? She's getting bullied by that brat! There is no way I will allow this to continue!"

He said this with a resolute tone, preparing to stand from the bushes and confront the young man.

Before he could, though, he was immediately pulled back and slapped on the back of his head.

"You moron. Don't you see? Look at her expression. It's been a long time since I've seen her like that."

With a look of pure disappointment, Kaito continued smacking his younger brother, hoping that it would knock some sense into his thick skull.

Rikuto, momentarily shocked by Kaito's acts of violence, was about to give him a piece of his mind, but when he saw the bright smile on Hiyori's face, his anger quickly cowed.

"...You're right," he trailed off, his face now painted in awe.

Years. It had been years since he had seen his younger sister so... happy.

Unfortunately, that didn't last long, though, as a scowl swiftly took root on his face.

"I still don't trust him. Pretty boys like him... I can't stand them. If he does anything out of line, I'm going to beat his ass."

Kaito just exhaled deeply, wondering if his brother would ever mature.

Even if Kaito was protective of Hiyori, he wasn't as impulsive as his younger brother.

Unbeknownst to them, however, a certain golden eyed boy had long since spotted them.

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Back at Kiyotaka and Hiyori, their conversation continued.

"Still, I'm intrigued by the fact that you took in an interest in this genre."

That comment made Hiyori pout again.

Everyone always assumed that she was a super innocent girl who always had her head up in the clouds.

That was false.

She had read many different genres of books, a lot of which had

darker themes.

As such, she wasn't as naïve as her father, or her brothers, thought she was.

Novels, particularly the one she was currently holding, had given her insight into the world beyond the palace walls.

"Most people assume I only enjoy gentle, whimsical stories. But books like this... they *show* something... something realistic. The world isn't just kindness and fairy tales, is it?"

Her words unwillingly brought forth unpleasant memories for the young man.

"...No," he said softly, his words carrying a rare weight to them. "It isn't."

Hiyori, not noticing his true feelings, let out a soft breath. As if she was relieved.

"Then... I suppose I just want to *see* it. Not experience it, of course! But... understand it. Through books, I can see worlds beyond my own."

For a girl who had never set foot beyond the palace walls, books were her window to everything—both beautiful and ugly.

Hearing that, for a brief moment, Kiyotaka saw a part himself in Hiyori: the pure, innocent, childish curiosity he once had in seeing the outside world.

"...That's reasonable."

Hiyori blinked. "It is?"

"Yes."

Hiyori smiled softly, thankful that he understood her feelings.

Glancing at him shyly, she spoke with a low whisper, "Um, w-would you like to see the library now, Kiyotaka-kun?"

Now back to his normal, neutral expression, Kiyotaka just nodded simply.

"Ehehe, let's go!"

Kiyotaka, amused by her burst in energy, decided to poke fun at her again.

"Maybe this time you'll actually reach the library, right, *Princess*?"

"E-Eh? S-Stop calling me that! And I really did, um, go to the library! Okay!?"

"A princess should not lie."

"B-But I'm really not lying!"

Despite the pout on her face, she found herself smiling without thinking.

Even if Kiyotaka seemed like a rather mischievous boy, she found herself enjoying his presence.

She wasn't sure if they were friends or if this was friendship, but whatever it was, she didn't want to lose it.

Unbeknownst to her, she couldn't know that what she had seen of the boy was just the tip of the ice burg.

The questions remained...

Could she handle what laid underneath?

Or would that twinkle in her eyes be extinguished when faced with the truth?

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Hope you enjoyed the chapter!

V1 - Chapter 6: Factions

Location: Tokyo, Japan

Night had fallen, and the Moon was full—its reflection shimmering on the surface of Tokyo Bay.

Overlooking the bay, a vast estate laid exposed under it's light.

At the top story, a room housed a middle-aged man seated at his desk, hunched over.

The light from his desk-side lamp cast shadows of endless stacks of paperwork and an empty coffee mug.

His normally sharp ruby eyes now dim, the weight of fatigue too hard to carry.

Leaning back, the man exhaled deeply, taking off his glasses for a moment.

This man—**Horikita Ryouma**—is one of the leading figures within the **anti-amendment** faction of the Genesis Party.

Dedicated, diligent, and sharp—his peers would describe him with such words because he was never one to shy away from his duties as a member of the National Diet.

At this very moment, however, that appearance was nowhere to be seen.

His tired eyes drifted back to a letter he had received from one of his contacts within the Public Security Intelligence Agency.

"—investigators concluded there was nothing wrong with the crime scene. It was an open and shut case of aggravated robbery and murder. I can't provide you any more assistance on this matter. Our Director is putting us

under a lot of pressure to find the missing military equipment. The truth of the matter, however, is that he's looking for any spare necks to put on a chopping block to avoid scrutiny. I'm sure you understand how frustrating internal politics can be."

The creases on his forehead deepened.

"Nothing..." he murmured to no one in particular. "Just another murder by a foreigner... that's the story that everyone believes, isn't it?"

His expression turned dark as a memory resurfaced.

It was night-time.

Not too long ago, Ryouma had befriended a colleague in the anti-amendment faction.

Sports, current events, politics: they were regular topics the duo discussed over drinks at a local izakaya.

Often times, however, they joked about their personal lives.

"Heh, you too, Ryouma? My wife won't stop nagging me about working so late. If she saw what I was really doing now... well, let's just hope there'd still be a body for my funeral."

Ryouma raised his eyebrows. "That bad, huh?"

"Oh, you wouldn't believe. She can be a real pain sometimes, especially with this god damn pregnancy."

Rolling his eyes, Ryouma responded, "Right... the pregnancy."

"Yep. The *pregnancy*."

Ryouma sighed. "Is it really that hard to put on a piece of rubber? Or do you just like changing diapers, **Masaru?**"

Kobayashi Masaru, seated across from Ryouma, scoffed.

"Well, at least I'm getting *some* action, unlike *other* people I know."

Ignoring his jab, and the annoyingly smug look on Masaru's face, Ryouma just casually cleaned his glasses.

"And how's that working out for you?"

Silence.

More silence.

"..."

"..."

"Okay. I'll admit, you got me there," he chuckled, chugging the remaining alcohol in his glass down.

"Haah," he exhaled, wiping his face with his arm, "that hit the spot."

Ryouma just shook his head, taking a few conservative sips from his own glass.

The chair creaked as Masaru got up from his seat. "I'll be back. Don't drink that too fast, eh?"

"...Sarcastic prick," Ryouma muttered under his breath, yet still found himself smiling without thinking. Banter between them never ceased to amuse him.

Now left alone, Ryouma leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes for a moment to take in the atmosphere.

Time likes these were always fun. It was a change of pace compared to the layers of paperwork he had to go through during the day.

He lifted his glass, ready to take another sip—until a series of drunken slurs, emerging from the other side of the room, caught his attention.

"You... *foreigners*. You came here, fucked our country with crime, and now you're takin' our jobs!?"

"H-Hey, I think there's been a misunderstanding. Why don't we cool it

and—"

The man's words cut off, the powerful left hook to his face sending him tumbling to the ground.

Peeking at the commotion from the corner of his eyes, Ryouma scoffed at what he saw.

"Another fight, huh?"

Masaru, having returned from the restroom, commented out loud from behind Ryouma.

"Seems that way."

Witnessing the one-sided beatdown, Masaru winced. "Is anyone going to stop him?"

"Probably not. Putting aside his sheer size, the man he's beating is... foreign. They're not exactly in the good graces of Japanese citizens at the moment. *We* know that better than anyone."

Masaru crossed his arms over his chest. "Yeah, well, that doesn't make it okay."

"You're right. It doesn't."

Not too long after, the newly employed security team arrived, bringing the brawl to an abrupt end.

In the past, security—particularly in casual and social establishments like izakayas—had not been necessary.

But times had changed; violent crimes were now more frequent.

The night continued, the atmosphere becoming less lively as more and more people left the premises.

The duo, however, stayed in their private booth—drinking, eating, and chatting to their heart's content.

With the room quieter, the buzzing of the television was easier to

hear.

"—welcome back to Tokyo's number one late night talk show. I am your host, Yuto Akira, and today, we have a *very* special guest. Everyone, please give him a round of applause—it's **Shirogane Hanzo!**"

A loud applause proceeded to play, coming to an end as the man in question took a seat.

"Thank you, Akira. And greetings to everyone watching. I'm thrilled to be here."

Ryouma's ears perked up hearing the familiar name.

"Shirogane, huh," he mumbled between bites, "he's been showing up a lot lately, don't you think—"

He stopped himself, the words getting stuck in his throat.

Because at this very moment, he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

The Masaru he knew—that chill, laid back, funny, and sarcastic guy—was nowhere to be seen.

"...Masaru?"

His friend was *trembling*.

Not out of angst.

Not out of terror.

And certainly not out of fear.

No, this was something else entirely.

"...That fucking bastard," Masaru rasped under his breath, his knuckles turning white as he gripped his glass tighter.

Rage.

Unadulterated. Unrelenting. Unmatched.

This was the first time Ryouma had seen his friend so... *hateful*—resentful.

And as he followed his gaze—it landed on one man.

Shirogane Hanzo.

That left Ryouma puzzled.

What could have warranted that man, favoured by the public, such a scornful look from his friend?

Concerned with his odd behaviour, Ryouma gently tapped his shoulder. "Hey. Are you alright, Masaru?"

That simple gesture snapped his friend out of his tunnel vision.

"Huh? Yeah... yeah, I'm fine. It's just—"

He suddenly stopped himself, eyeing Ryouma carefully.

"That man... *Shirogane*. What do you know of him?"

It was an innocent question. But the way he said that name—it was *sobering*.

Ryouma took a deep breath before responding.

"Well... he's the current Director of the Japanese Self Defence Forces. The man who caught Iwakura Genjirou—the previous Director—selling weapons and information, illegally. With those merits and his previous experience, the Minister of Defence had recommended him to take Iwakura's job, a proposition signed off by the Prime Minister himself."

Masaru's gaze sharpened. "And do you have any doubts about him?"

"Shirogane? Not really. The man has a clean record and a lot of experience under his belt." Ryouma calmly replied, glancing at Masaru. "Don't you think so too?"

But Masaru ignored his question, instead asking his own: "What about

Iwakura Genjirou? Do you have any *doubts* about his conviction?"

It was a sudden change of topic—a pivot that made Ryouma raise an eyebrow.

"What's there to doubt? The evidence against him was practically a smoking gun. His innocence was never really a question, right?"

But again, Masaru did not respond. Instead, he downed another shot.

The table shook slightly as he placed the empty glass on the table.

"Hey... we're friends. I can trust you, right, Ryouma?"

The out of place questions, particularly this one, and his odd behaviour only made the atmosphere that much more eerie.

Despite that, Ryouma decided to play along.

"Of course."

Masaru glanced around, almost as if he was looking out for anyone that could be listening in.

He looked tense—on edge.

"Look... What I'm about to say may sound crazy, but hear me out, alright?"

Ryouma slowly nodded, leaning forwards with intrigue.

"I... I have this *theory*. It's almost like a conspiracy of sorts, but if it's true—well, the implications could be *devastating*."

"...Okay. Go ahead. Tell me what's on your mind."

Masaru took a deep breath.

"What if I told you that Iwakura Genjirou... is *innocent?"*

Ryouma's eyes widened, disbelief written on his face.

He blinked a few times, not saying a word—gauging whether Masaru

was making a bad joke or not.

But the longer the silence hung, the realisation that Masaru was serious sunk in.

"...Masaru. The evidence was damning."

Masaru's jaw clenched. "Ryouma. I've known Genjirou since I was a kid. Even then, he had never strayed from the path of light. Honour had always been in his blood, and loyalty to the nation was engraved in his bones."

His expression darkened, his right palm clenching tightly into a fist, shaking slightly.

"Espionage? Selling military equipment for money? He would never do such treasonous acts. Not the Genjirou I know."

His tone was firm—angry even. It could've swayed anyone to reconsider.

Yet, although surprised to learn that Masaru was Genjirou's childhood friend, Ryouma did not look convinced.

"Masaru," Ryouma gently started, "people change... sometimes for the worse."

Masaru frowned. "No way. Not Genjirou. If there was one thing he loved more than his life, it's this country. He would never betray it, especially not with the heinous crimes he was found guilty of."

For a moment, Ryouma wondered if this was the alcohol talking, that maybe Masaru was in denial—hurt that his friend was guilty of high treason.

But no. Neither of those options could be true.

Because despite the alcohol, Masaru's eyes were clear—absolute.

Without a shroud of doubt and despite the mountain of evidence, he genuinely believed that his friend Iwakura Genjirou was innocent.

Ryouma thought that to be foolish. That was his perspective based on a rational analysis.

But seeing Masaru's unwavering faith piqued his curiosity.

"...Okay. Iwakura Genjirou is innocent. Let's progress with that assumption in mind and continue with this 'theory' of yours. If Genjirou is innocent, then that means someone likely framed him. What's the motive? Who would go through the effort to do this?"

Masaru scoffed. "Isn't it obvious? ***They*** want complete control of the military."

"They?" Ryouma asked, looking slightly confused.

"The pro-amendment faction."

Ryouma's eyes widened slightly hearing *them* mentioned.

Masaru leaned closer. "Think about it: the pro-amendment faction is full of weapons and defence contractors, like *Nagumo Katsuyuki* for instance—people who stand to gain from Article 9's amendment. You even said so yourself in the last session, right?"

"...I did," Ryouma nodded slowly, gradually recollecting past events. "But—"

Masaru cut him off. "And do you remember what happened after the incident?"

Ryouma thought for a moment. "Well... there was a drastic change in composition of the factions within the National Diet. More and more Diet members shifted to the—"

He stopped himself, realisation dawning.

Witnessing his reaction, Masaru smiled knowingly. "That's right. The pro-amendment faction gained more support, didn't they? Since the quote-on-quote missing weapons posed a severe threat to national security, the Article 9 amendment was looked on more favourably."

"But wasn't that going to happen anyway, though?" Ryouma asked.

"The national crime rate was already rising, and the number of coordinated violent hate crimes against Japanese citizens was getting out of control. Wasn't it only natural that security reforms and desire for military freedom, possible only through Article 9's amendment, would gain traction? *Them* being behind this seems... hasty—unnecessary."

Masaru shook his head. "That's where you're wrong, Ryouma. Before the incident, the motion to amend Article 9 was still in its early stages and wasn't a legitimate proposal yet. Criminal activity alone would not have been sufficient reason to keep the motion afloat for so long. With this scandal, however, they had enough of a cause to keep the issue going."

What he was saying was not false, and the more Ryouma thought it about, the more probable it sounded. He chastised himself internally for not remembering this detail sooner, blaming the alcohol for slowing his cognition.

"And that's not all the pro-amendment faction gained, is it? Following the scandal, they garnered even more public support. You saw it yourself, didn't you? Posts on social media, newspaper articles, blog posts—heck, even posters around university campuses. Praises for it were, and still are, *everywhere*.

"Hm. You're right. It certainly fits their motives and goals," Ryouma commented. "But 'control of the military'? How's does that fit into all of this?"

"Well," Masaru said, pulling his phone out of his back pocket, "I did some digging, and I found out that our little 'friend' *Nagumo* has had some past deals with Shirogane—deals that occurred *before* he was appointed as the Director of the JSDF."

Defence contracts where both parties were involved—Ryouma saw the evidence with his own eyes.

Despite his current state, Ryouma was sharp enough to understand what Masaru was implying.

But he still wasn't completely convinced.

"It's not exactly unheard of, though, is it? It's public knowledge that Shirogane was a General in charge of overseeing the integration of defence technologies into the JSDF. And Nagumo is a well-known defence and weapons contractor. Isn't it only natural for the two to be acquainted?"

It was a good point. By itself, the two working together wasn't suspicious at all.

But Masaru thought differently.

"If you look it that way alone, then you may have a point. But consider this: General Shirogane—a man closely acquainted with Nagumo, a key figure from the pro-amendment faction—just so happens to 'acquire' evidence that implicates the current Director of the JSDF, Iwakura Genjirou, of high treason. Then, as a reward for his 'good deeds', the Minister of Defence suddenly recommends Shirogane as a candidate to replace Genjirou. And to top it all off, following that, the motion to amend Article 9—which was only in its early stages at the time—gains even more support from both the Diet and the public."

He paused, his gaze meeting Ryouma's.

"Are you *really* telling me that all of those events occurring in sequence is just a 'coincidence'? That they all just *happen* to benefit the pro-amendment faction?"

Although alcohol had impaired his senses, when confronted with that big picture, Ryouma felt a sense of unease flicker in his heart.

If Genjirou was truly as righteous and patriotic as Masaru claimed, then it wouldn't make sense for Genjirou to have committed such treasonous acts.

Under that assumption, there was only one conclusion.

"...Are you suggesting that Director Shirogane is the pro-amendment faction's pawn? Is that how they had planned to gain complete control of the military? And how they had planned to secure more lucrative contracts in the event that Article 9 is amended?"

Marsaru nodded. "That, or they are in bed together. Either way, it makes sense, though, doesn't it? Knowing Genjirou, he probably showed resistance to their advances. The military industrial complex isn't exactly known for being... *moral*."

Ryouma frowned. "And with him still as the Director of the JSDF, the pro-amendment faction couldn't achieve their goals..."

Masaru nodded. "So they had him *removed*. Replacing him with someone more *malleable* to their will. And paraded their substitution as a 'clean' figurehead to gain more public support for the military and, in turn, Article 9's amendment."

"Holy shit... the pro-amendment faction, the military, and even possibly the Defence Minister—all of them connected through a conspiracy to push forward Article 9's amendment?"

"Yeah. That was the conclusion I reached as well."

"But wait," Ryouma began, "even if they're working with Director Shirogane, at the end of the day, the **Prime Minister** still has supreme control over the military. Without his cooperation—"

For the second time, he stopped himself.

Masaru gave him a knowing look. "You realised didn't you? The Prime Minister has forsaken his **neutral** stance and begun supporting the amendment of Article 9."

A tense silence ensued as the duo slowly unravelled the implications.

Ryouma was first to break the silence.

"I... I'm reluctant to even suggest this, but do you really think *he* is in bed with the pro-amendment faction? I mean, he did approve of his Defence Minister's recommendation. And the Genesis Party did gain more public favour following the scandal. Framing Iwakura, who was chosen by Miyako from the opposing Civic Party, would benefit *him*."

Masaru listened to his words carefully, but he had already arrived at an answer.

"No. Otherwise, that wouldn't make sense," Masaru stated.

"How are you so sure?" Ryouma asked tentatively.

"For starters, the Civic Party—even after rebranding themselves—had already had their reputation torn apart. With events from Genesis and Miyako's immigration policies, risking exposure by framing Genjirou would be inefficient."

He paused, taking a breath.

"Secondly, if the Prime Minister was truly involved from the start, he could've just used his executive power to appoint Shirogane as the new Director himself. With him on their side, there would be no need to frame Genjirou."

His words were not false. The Prime Minister, although being the supreme commander of the JSDF, has the executive power to choose whomever he wants to take the position as Director of the JSDF.

Masaru leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table and interlocking his fingers.

"But that's not what the Prime Minister did, is it? We know he chooses, and awards people based on merit. That much is clear seeing his handpicked Finance Minister's success in weeding out embezzlement in the Diet. It's only natural he would follow his Defence Minister's recommendation in appointing Shirogane—the man who had 'caught' Genjirou—as the new Director."

This time, he drank a sip of water before continuing.

"And even now that he has begun supporting the amendment, he isn't trying to force it through by dissolving the House of Representatives. Coupling that with his prior neutral stance, his actions certainly doesn't represent someone that is a devout follower of the pro-amendment faction's *agenda*."

He paused again, letting his words sink in.

"Even if you were to disregard all those reasons, do you really think a man like him—who risked his *life* on the day of Genesis to catch

wicked individuals like Naoe, Isomaru and Ryosuke—would work with such people? No way. I think that It's only natural he would start supporting the amendment, since that is the will of the people."

Ryouma, hearing that detailed explanation, exhaled deeply.

"You're right... with that context, it doesn't make any sense for him to be in bed with them. I must look pretty foolish for thinking so, huh?"

Ryouma, who admired the Prime Minister, felt ashamed for ever doubting him.

Masaru waved his hands. "No, no. It's fine. Just knowing that you're engaged with this discussion is... reassuring. And knowing that I can share this—well, conspiracy with *someone* fills me with relief."

Ryouma felt his lips turn upwards without thinking.

"Thanks. I'm glad you trusted me with this, Masaru."

They remained seated in a comfortable silence, peacefully eating and drinking.

"So... what do you plan to do?" Ryouma asked, putting his glass down. "This is all circumstantial at best. Without evidence, though, it's just baseless speculation."

Masaru's hands clenched. "I'm first going to investigate that bastard Shirogane, who I'm certain is in cahoots with the pro-amendment faction. I'll look into the others suspects after that if I don't find anything, though."

"Let me know if I can help in any way. I got your back, alright?"

Masaru grinned. "I will."

The memory came to an end there.

Those were the last words they ever shared.

Masaru, his pregnant wife, and their two children—all of them mercilessly *killed* in their own home.

The media had cited that the perpetrator was a *foreign* man in his forties.

Everyone who heard the news would believe it; the numerous violent crimes against Japanese citizens ensured that.

After all, the detailed images of the gruesome crime—that had been *leaked* shortly after the incident—would have stroked anyone's heart with a fiery rage.

But Ryouma knew differently.

This was premediated. Ryouma was certain of it.

Someone—no, *they* had silenced him.

'The pro-amendment faction.'

The fact that they had been driven to take such drastic action meant that Masaru had rattled their cage.

The price for that, however, was his own life and his family's.

'Unforgivable.'

Ryouma's hands clenched tightly.

His close friend's death wasn't the worst part, though.

A fragment of a memory resurfaced, recollecting his most recent interaction with his old rival during the last plenary session.

"How long do you intend to oppose this amendment, Horikita? The Prime Minister himself supports the amendment of Article 9, yet you and your 'faction' still haven't conceded. For god's sake, a member from your own faction—Kobayashi Masaru, I believe—was killed by a foreigner! Doesn't that speak to the levels of how dangerous the climate is at this very moment?"

"Nagumo, have some tact!" A voice called out from the distance in the chamber, rising in support of Ryouma.

Katsuyuki frowned. He turned to the entire chamber, his voice firm yet *sincere*.

"Are you people really that heartless? He died supporting your cause, yet none of you are shaken—how callous. All of you need to stop burying your heads in the sand and see the storm that is brewing in the ocean."

He paused, letting his words sink in.

"Our people are growing fearful as violent crimes are becoming more common. Local law enforcement personnel—who are taught de-escalation tactics—cannot subdue those who want blood. The National Police Agency do not have the resources to investigate every case. And the Public Security Intelligence Agency is too busy chasing ghosts, looking for military equipment that has seemingly vanished off the face of the Earth. It is time we consider a different approach—before it's too late."

The memory ended there.

Ryouma shook his head, his closed fists shaking in restrained anger.

'He really is just as cunning as he is despicable. Using Masaru's death like that...'

Ryouma wouldn't expect anything less from someone like Nagumo Katsuyuki. Anyone who knew Katsuyuki knows that when presented an opportunity, Katsuyuki wouldn't hesitate to weaponise it.

'And he's able to do that because no one will ever doubt Masaru's death for what it was reported as.'

The national crime rate—it was the perfect cover.

So in the eyes of the public, any accusations Ryouma levied against Katsuyuki would just make the anti-amendment faction look worse than they already did.

After all, having the same stance as the Civic Party—led by former Prime Minister Miyako, who had disgraced Japan during his term—did not help their public image.

Even worse, Masaru's death had only accelerated the bleeding, fostering dissent and whispers of doubt within his faction.

And the media, bloodthirsty as they are, hadn't hesitated to sink their teeth in, causing further internal disorder.

'It's practically a checkmate. I don't know how we can turn the tables to stop this amendment from occurring in the near future.'

For a country that had been ravaged by war, Ryouma once thought that the amendment of Article 9 would never pass through. It was just too radical of an idea to even consider.

'But that's no longer the case. Public support is far too high. It's reached the point where public protests are being organised outside the National Diet building, all of them advocating for the amendment of Article 9.'

They weren't small ones, either.

They had grown substantially, multiplying like cancer.

The good news, however, was that they remained peaceful... *for now*.

He sighed, leaning back on his chair.

"Just how did we reach where we are today?" Ryouma murmured out loud to his empty office.

He worked backwards in his mind, desperately searching for the instant where everything had spiralled out of control.

There was only one event that stood out in his brain.

'Miyako's immigration policies, and the increase in crime rate that came with it—they are what brought this storm, and everything else that followed.'

Ryouma, for a moment, thought it was the perfect example of the butterfly effect.

Easing of immigration policies, criminals slipping through, violent crimes becoming more frequent—all disturbances that led to the

chaotic climate in Japan at this moment.

'And they used that to their advantage to push their agenda, perfectly.'

Masaru gritted his teeth. What was he doing just now? Admiring them for their craftiness and ruthless cunning?

But along this train of thought, a rather *chilling* possibility entered his mind.

'If the pro-amendment faction were capable of manufacturing such an advantageous position from just that... then what if...'

He stopped himself. The thought too *disturbing* to consider.

'No, no, no. They couldn't have done such things... could they have?'

His intrusive thoughts forced their way in.

Was it really a just a coincidence that the crime rate shot up so quickly?

They had taken the life of a Diet member *brutally* without hesitation, going as far to kill said person's family.

Taking a few innocent, civilian lives wouldn't be any different.

Blaming, and framing foreigners for the crimes would be easy.

Spreading fear through the media would be even easier.

Repeat the process enough times and, eventually, people's perception would change.

And human nature would take the wheel.

'The violent crimes blamed on foreigners... the flow-on widespread xenophobia... the hate crimes against Japanese citizens that followed.'

All of those events forged the perfect weapon—both a shield and sword to *protect* and *enforce*.

A weapon that was far too beneficial for the pro-amendment faction

to be just mere coincidence.

'The high crime rate, the xenophobia, the hate crimes... they manufactured it. They used it to smear the opposing Civic Party, push their agenda, and silence those who got too close to the truth.'

The more Ryouma extrapolated, the more he trembled.

Because these events... they traced back **years.**

'Is... is such a thing really possible? Can they—No, did they really calculate that far ahead?'

The thought that a group—let alone a *singular* person—could simultaneously plan that far ahead, predict events, and mould it to their will at such a large scale... it *terrified* Ryouma.

Faced with an opponent like that, what hope was there?

Ryouma rested his head in his hands, thinking.

'Who... who could stop them?'

He was not equipped to deal with such foe.

No one was.

*'No... maybe **he** could do it.'*

There was only one man that came to mind.

The hero of the nation.

The founder of the Genesis Party.

The man who had gone against the odds, wagered his life, and stood victorious—taking down corrupt politicians like Naoe, Isomaru and Ryosuke.

'Ayanokōji Atsuomi.'

If there was anyone who could stand against the pro-amendment faction, it was *him*.

'With the current situation, however, even he can't do anything.'

It was up to the Diet whether the amendment of Article 9 went through or not; the Prime Minister's influence held little weight on the outcome.

'But...'

For a moment, Ryouma's democratic ideals wavered.

'If Japan had a strong leader with supreme power, who was able to make bold decisions for the country without any shackles...'

The people were advocating for that, and Ryouma had seen firsthand how widespread that sentiment was.

Initially, Ryouma had believed that that would be a fatal mistake—that it was dangerous path for Japan to walk down, especially now that he knew just how *terrifying* the pro-amendment faction were.

His perspective, however, had shifted.

'And if that leader was him...'

Hope.

It was small—only a glimmer in the darkness surrounding it.

But it was there, and Ryouma felt it's comfort even if it was fleeting.

If *that man* had that level of power at his disposal, keeping the pro-amendment faction in check would be an easy feat.

No, it would be guaranteed.

'But without rewriting the Constitution, it would be impossible.'

He slumped in his chair.

'I should forget that idea. Even if the chance is low, looking for actual evidence against the pro-amendment faction would be more productive. That way, I may be able gain the Prime Minister's support and backing.'

Ryouma figured that the Prime Minister probably had his own doubts about the pro-amendment faction. That much was clear given his past *neutral stance* and present wary support.

From Ryouma's perspective, the Prime Minister was at a crossroads.

Either go against the amendment, losing the people's favour.

Or publicly support it to avoid the people's scrutiny.

There was only one logical choice to keep Japan's political situation stable.

Without actual proof that the pro-amendment faction was as dangerous as Ryouma believed them to be—nothing would change, and he wouldn't be able to gain the Prime Minister's favour.

He clenched his jaw tightly as anger and irritation seeped under his skin.

'If the amendment were to pass, the pro-amendment faction would gain power beyond belief. I can't let that happen. I can't let such a group continue to exist.'

CREAK

The door to his office opened slightly, revealing a mature, yet strikingly beautiful, raven-haired woman.

"Honey... could I please have a moment of your time?" The woman whispered softly.

Ryouma, who was not in the mood for a chat—especially at this very moment—simply waved her off, not bothering to even spare her a glance.

"Not now. I'm busy."

Despite his cold words, she didn't relent. Day after day, he had been so absorbed with himself in his private office that she was starting to get worried.

The door opened wider. Her footsteps light against the carpet.

"...Honey, talk to me—no, talk to *us*, please."

She inched closer to him.

"You're becoming... distant. When was the last time you spoke to our daughter? She's becoming even more isolated ever since her brother, *our son*, left for ANHS."

Ryouma remained motionless, still turned away from her. His rejection of her pleadings wounding her.

But she continued walking towards him, not wanting to give up just yet.

"I-I don't even know if she has friends her age. All she does is study, eat, and sleep. Maybe... maybe if you talked with her—"

Ryouma's gaze snapped to his wife's, his frustration boiling over.

"I said not now."

She recoiled at his tone and the sharpness in his ruby eyes.

This wasn't her husband—the person who always gazed at her with warmth.

He had become a stranger, and she didn't know why.

"O-Okay, I'll leave you be," she murmured, walking away.

The door closed with a gentle thud.

"Tch."

What was he thinking taking his frustrations out on his wife? She only wanted to talk, but he had so coldly pushed her away.

Perhaps Masaru's death had impacted him more than he had let on.

His wife and children, who he cherished deeply, were the very things he was causing harm.

'If... if I pursue this path. What will happen of my family?'

Will his family suffer the same fate as Masaru's did?

Those dark thoughts scared him.

The decision to seek the truth or live in blissful ignorance—it wasn't one that could be made whimsically.

He sighed.

"The future is bleak."

□□□□□□□ ✧ [M][A][C][H][I][N][A][T][I][O][N][S] ✧ □□□□□□□

Location: Imperial Household Agency, Tokyo

It was evening.

In the depths of a hexagonally shaped building, a group of people were seated along a long, sleek, and polished oak table, their expressions a mixture of worry and contempt.

For months all of them had watched their influence slowly dwindle, the changes in the national budget neutering their power and control.

It was agonising for all of them. They had held positions of great privilege and received generous benefits through the operation they had been running.

But that pedestal they once stood tall on was starting to crumble, giving way to a new group.

In their minds, such a conclusion could not—no, *must* not be allowed.

No matter the cost.

A younger official, Ishikawa, was the first to break the tense silence.

"We need to move before it's too late. If we wait any longer, we won't just lose our influence—we'll be forced out completely."

An older man, Itachi, scoffed. "Move *how*? The Cabinet's changes in the national budget have strangled us, Ishikawa."

Another man, Kuroda, cut in. His tone laced with annoyance.

"It's not just that; *they* are gaining followers and support that will soon eclipse ours. Ishikawa is right, if we don't make a move, it's only a matter of time before this *arrangement* of ours comes to an end."

The room went dead silent. They all knew what he was referring to: the rival faction.

Their once meagre influence had flourished into a well-oiled machine, threatening to devour them whole if they remained idle.

"Our recent efforts to skim money through security and aesthetic reforms around the palace is drawing suspicion as construction takes longer to complete," Itachi declared, his fingers interlocking. "We need to first find a new method to secure additional funds and regain control."

What Itachi said was not false. They all had subordinates for which loyalty was bought rather than earned.

With that in mind, Itachi—known for being conservative—believed that they should first cut their losses and gain momentum before taking any aggressive action.

That plan, however, did not sit well with Kuroda, who scoffed in disapproval.

"I think we're all *aware* of the situation, Itachi," he sneered, condescension in his tone. "Or does your senile brain require constant affirmation of the problem we face?"

Itachi scowled, a visible vein protruding from his forehead. He and Kuroda always clashed heads, the frequency of which had only increased since the budget cut and rival faction's birth.

"You son of—"

The atmosphere only grew more heated from there. Insults and curses

were hurled between the room.

At the head of the table, Issei sat in silence.

He had organised this meeting to see if any of his loyal subordinates, with higher positions in the IHA, had any ideas to solve the issues at hand.

Like always, however, the discussion had devolved into meaningless drabble and a game of pointing fingers.

He exhaled deeply.

There was a silver lining: the *shocking* information he had learned from the spies he had deployed.

Without it, the plan he *originally* thought of wouldn't have been as *profitable* as it is now.

Yet, despite the seductive rewards, his heart remained torn.

The plan he had in mind—he feared it, he wanted to avoid it, and he hated himself for it.

But he had to do it.

Issei cleared his throat.

"Enough."

The bickering ceased, their postures turning rigid at the sharpness of his tone.

"It seems that none of you have a solution to offer. Correct?"

No one said a word.

No one even dared to meet his gaze.

But that didn't matter; the silence was telling enough on its own.

Issei sighed. In his heart, he had hoped someone had conjured a solution that would sweep away all of his problems.

It was time to face reality, however.

"There is a method. A way to solve some, maybe even all, of our problems in one move."

With that single statement, he had the room's attention.

He took a deep breath.

"The Princess will be leaving the palace soon," he began, ignoring his trembling heart. "She will be accompanied by a boy her age to explore Tokyo."

Their expressions shifted rapidly.

"The boy in question," he continued, ignoring their expressions, "is the Prime Minister's *son*."

Eyes widened, mouths parted, and soft gasps filled the room.

Then—their eyes shone with greed.

Their reactions were similar to his own when he had discovered the truth himself.

The Prime Minister had been hiding his son—his *weakness* from the world.

And knowing that opened numerous possibilities for them.

"During their trip, if they were to be attacked or ***kidnapped*** by 'foreign criminals'..." He trailed off, inviting discussion.

Kuroda was the first to cut in. "The ransom for their release would be... *expensive*."

Ishikawa, connecting the dots, was next. "The public and His Majesty would be outraged once they found out."

Itachi, rubbing his chin, was third. "The central government would have no choice but to placate His Majesty's wrath, paying the fee in full..."

"And with the Imperial Princess being a victim, no one would suspect we were behind this," Ishikawa continued, his voice rising an octave.

Kuroda leaned forwards, grinning from ear to ear. "If we play our cards right, we might even be able to use the incident as an excuse to increase the IHA's funding."

Silence hung for a moment as they all consolidated their thoughts.

"This... could work," Ishikawa said out loud.

Murmurs of agreement spread throughout the room.

From that point, the room was charged with a sense of hope.

Their reality no longer seemed that grim.

The Prime Minister's son and the Imperial Princess—they were their lifeline. A gift that they would not squander.

Issei, who had rejuvenated that light in his subordinates' eyes, watched in silence.

A few words. That was all it took for them to catch onto his thinking.

He knew he was no better than them.

He knew what this plan would entail.

His niece, Hiyori, was just an innocent girl who desired to see what lay beyond her cage.

There was no doubt that she would be traumatized by the end of this.

He sighed.

"It seems we've all reached a consensus."

Nods of agreement followed.

"Before we start making preparations, I just want to make one thing clear."

His gaze sharpened.

"The Princess. She must not be harmed. No matter the circumstances."

There was no arguing it. They knew the Imperial Princess was important to Issei.

So even if it would add complexities to their plan, they couldn't refuse his order.

They had seen his wrath firsthand, and it wasn't an experience they wanted.

There was one question that hadn't been clarified, however.

"...And what of the boy?" Ishikawa spoke up.

Hearing that, Issei thought carefully for a moment, evaluating all the implications.

The boy in question was talked about often by his niece. There was no doubt she had taken to the young man quite well. Her successful pleadings to her father to let the boy stay in the palace's residence was telling enough.

Despite that, accounting for that boy's safety was not a burden that Issei could carry, even if it would hurt Hiyori.

"He just needs to be alive. Otherwise, do what must be done."

Blood, bruises, broken bones—it didn't matter.

For the sake of the ransom, the boy only needed to be breathing.

And as twisted as it sounded, if the boy did look in bad shape before contact was made, their earning potential would increase.

If Issei was being honest with himself, he hoped that to be the case: the resentment he had for *that man* stirred such sentiments within him.

Hearing his orders, his subordinates launched into action.

Strategizing the logistics of the kidnapping and ransom, identifying the capture site, contacting the operatives they trusted—these were some of the measures discussed in quick succession.

Issei let them talk.

Let them praise him, let them celebrate their newfound hope.

He simply sat there, realising that this was the moment he crossed a line.

And as he let his thoughts drift, a sentiment lingered in his head.

'Forgive me, Hiyori.'

****

Hope you enjoyed the chapter!

V1 - Chapter 7: The Day Before Tomorrow

Location: Imperial Palace, Tokyo

Shelves.

Shelves upon shelves.

All loaded with books.

Tables, chairs, light from the afternoon sun.

And in the middle of it all, Hiyori sat.

Book in hand—in her own peaceful haven—humming softly as she turned the pages.

She peeked at the corner of the room—taking note of the time on the clock.

'Kiyotaka-kun should be here soon.'

Placing her novel on the coffee table, she leaned back into the softness of the recliner, basking in its comfort.

As she stretched her arms and rested her eyes, a soft, feminine voice called out to her.

"Hiyori? Are you awake, dear?"

She opened one eye. "Hm? Oh, Chiyoko-san! No, I was just taking a little break from reading."

The maidservant smiled. "I see. Would you like anything, sweetie? Drinks—snacks?"

"No, I'm okay, for now. Thanks for asking, though."

"Are you sure? Anything you like—I'll prepare it right away."

Hiyori paused, thinking for a brief moment.

"Mmm. Maybe I'll change my mind when Kiyotaka-kun arrives."

"'When Kiyotaka-kun arrives,' hmm~?"

Hiyori felt her cheeks warm. "Um, yes. H-He likes trying out the different pastries, you know?"

"Mhm. Treats you happen to end up eating as well, yes?"

"Eeep!"

She covered her face, peeking through the gaps in her fingers.

Like a child caught stealing cookies.

"D-Do you think he notices?"

"That you mooch off his plate when he's not looking?"

Hiyori nodded slowly—eyes wide like a puppy.

"Yes."

"Uwahh," she cried out, flailing her arms.

Chiyoko giggled.

"W-Well, he started it!! So it's only fair, right?"

"Right, right," Chiyoko replied, smiling ear-to-ear.

It hadn't been long since that boy had begun his stay at the palace.

Before then, Hiyori always had that same look.

Polite, soft spoken, gentle.

Not that there was anything inherently wrong with such traits.

She was just happy to see Hiyori acting her age.

Chiyoko checked the time.

"Well, I'll be back later. Okay?"

"Okay!" Hiyori beamed.

The handmaiden walked away, leaving Hiyori alone.

She glanced at the clock again.

Her eyebrows furrowed.

"Hmph, he's late."

Reading together, talking about books, even playing boardgames—they had become a daily occurrence.

A time to unwind and relax, usually during afternoons in the Imperial Library.

Of course, there were other means of entertainment.

Times where she learned more about him.

And his rather... cheeky personality.

Thinking this, a memory from earlier in the week resurfaced.

It was just two hours from midday.

A visit to the Imperial Gardens was on the agenda.

Maple trees, greens, the scent of blossoms.

And at the centre of it all, Hiyori knelt by the water's edge.

"They're so cute, aren't they?" Hiyori beamed, watching the koi swim eagerly toward her. "I try to feed them whenever I can. They recognize me, you know."

"Recognize you?" a flat voice replied from behind her.

"Mhm. I've been feeding them since I was little."

Her cradled hands dipped beneath the surface.

Immediately, the koi rushed in—nibbling the pellets in her open palms.

She giggled at the sensation. "See? They must really like me, right?"

"Or they just like the food."

Her head snapped backwards—eyes narrowing.

"Kiyotaka-kun, I'll have you know that our connection goes beyond just food."

"Does it?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Yes!" she huffed, turning back.

With a hushed voice, she murmured, "Don't listen to him, dearies; he's just jealous."

Amused by her antics, he took a step closer but didn't say a word.

Silence ensued as Hiyori continued feeding them.

Wiping her hands, she stood up—sneaking a glance at Kiyotaka from the corner of her eye.

He looked... intrigued.

"Would you like to try, Kiyotaka-kun?"

"...I don't see why not."

A typical Kiyotaka response.

She couldn't stop the smile even if she wanted to.

"Just hold out your hand like this—they'll come to you."

Mirroring her, he cradled the pellets.

Knelt.

Lowered his hands.

And waited.

"..."

But nothing.

Not a single one.

Hiyori blinked.

"That's strange... Maybe try lowering your hands a bit more, Kiyotaka-kun."

So he did.

And seconds passed.

Then a full minute.

But still, not a single fish dared to go near his hands.

"Why are they hesitating? They're usually so friendly..." Hiyori murmured.

Energetic, warm, friendly.

That's how they would act, even with strangers.

What she was witnessing, however, was vastly different.

The koi cautiously circled the edges of his reach but never once ventured near his palm.

At that moment, a thought suddenly struck Hiyori.

Hiyori covered her mouth, restraining her laughter.

"Kiyotaka-kun... are you scaring them?"

He frowned.

"...That would seem to be the case."

Her eyes gleamed with mischief.

Since the day he had arrived, he had found every opportunity to tease her.

And now?

She was going to return the favour.

"Oh my, how unusual. The ever-stoic Kiyotaka-kun, feared even by innocent little koi fish? How tragic~"

Kiyotaka's eye twitched slightly. "It's not that unusual."

"No, no, this is quite serious."

She gasped theatrically, placing a hand over her heart.

"Could it be... that the koi sense something about you? Perhaps they instinctively recognize you as *dangerous*? Are you a fearsome *predator* in disguise, Kiyotaka-kun?"

"...I suppose that's one theory," he grumbled.

Hiyori giggled. "Yes! Perhaps they see you as some great, looming force, like—like a heron!

"...I see."

"It's okay, Kiyotaka-kun. Even if the fish don't like you, I still—"

"How cruel."

"Eh?"

"To mock someone for being unloved by even the fish... that's rather harsh, don't you think?"

She stared at him, tilting her head slightly—gauging whether he was joking.

But Kiyotaka's face—though calm as ever—held the barest hint of something... solemn.

Her heart skipped a beat.

"W-Wait, you aren't actually upset, are you?" she asked, her voice rising an octave.

He turned away, avoiding her gaze.

Hiyori's playful grin froze.

And her heart squeezed in pain.

"W-Wait," she breathed, clasping her hands together. "I-I didn't mean it like that! I was just teasing, I swear! I-I mean, it's not like the fish hate you or anything! They're just... um... they're just shy! Y-Yes, that must be it!"

Kiyotaka didn't respond.

Panic shot into her stomach.

"I-I'll prove it to you!" she cried, scrambling to scoop up some food.

"Here, just—just try again, okay? The fish don't hate you! I-I'll even help! Look, if we do it together, I'm sure they'll come to you, too! So please, don't be sad!"

Still, Kiyotaka said nothing.

Hiyori choked back a small sob that threatened to escape.

"I-I'm sorry, Kiyotaka-kun."

She tugged on the back of his sleeve, on the verge of tears.

"Please, don't be upset. I... I didn't mean to—"

Kiyotaka finally turned to her—expression blank.

"I was joking."

Silence.

Hiyori blinked once.

Twice.

Her mouth parted slightly, as if struggling to comprehend his words.

"..."

"..."

"...H-Huh?"

"I wasn't actually upset."

Hiyori's entire body stiffened.

Her eyes darted down to the food in her hands, then back to Kiyotaka.

"...Y-Y-You—!"

Her face flushed red as she clenched her hands into tiny fists.

"Kiyotaka-kun, you—! You meanie!" she huffed, puffing out her cheeks. "I—I thought I really hurt your feelings! I was about to cry!"

"I noticed."

Hiyori let out an exasperated squeak, her arms flailing—hitting his chest.

"Y-You noticed and still let me panic like that?! T-That's terrible! Absolutely terrible!"

"You called me a heron."

"That was different!"

"Was it?"

"Yes!"

Hiyori flopped onto the ground in defeat, her silver hair cascading over her shoulders as she sulked dramatically.

Meanwhile, Kiyotaka tried feeding the koi again.

They still didn't come.

"Hmph, serves you right."

The memory ended there.

Given her lack of experience, being tricked by Kiyotaka was inevitable.

As time passed, however, she believed she had grown wise to his antics.

Atleast, she hoped that was the case.

"What a bully..." Hiyori murmured but smiled, nonetheless.

"Who's a bully?"

"Eeep!"

She jolted in her seat, her heart leaping out of her chest.

Turning her head, she glared at the perpetrator.

"K-Kiyotaka-kun, you scared me!"

"Sorry about that," he replied, walking past her—unbothered.

"You don't sound sorry," she huffed.

"Well, I am."

Hiyori peeked at him. "Really?"

"No."

"Uwahh!"

Kiyotaka took a seat from across her, holding a couple books.

"Should we get started, then?"

Hiyori harrumphed. "Fine."

□□□□□□□ ✧ MACHINATIONS ✧ □□□□□□□

A few hours passed by.

It had been quite a lazy afternoon.

Consuming refreshments, playing boardgames, discussing novels.

That was how they filled the time.

Now, evening was approaching, and the duo sat in silence—reading their own selections.

Well, one of them was at least.

Hiyori kept sneaking glances at Kiyotaka.

Thud.

Kiyotaka closed his book, setting it aside on the coffee table and away from their drinks and pastries.

He reached down, picking another from his stack.

Hiyori's eyes narrowed when she saw the cover.

"A military history book. Again," she commented. "Do you ever read anything else?"

Kiyotaka didn't glance at her. "It's practical. And interesting."

"You always say that, but don't you ever get tired of reading the same kind of thing?"

Kiyotaka turned another page. "Do you get tired of reading about fictional people falling in love?"

Hiyori choked. "T-That's—!"

She cleared her throat, trying to regain her composure. "For your information, I've only recently taken an interest in romance novels. And unlike *some* people, I at least try to read a variety of genres."

Kiyotaka glanced at the book in her hands before looking away, seemingly uninterested in her choice of literature. "I see."

She relaxed slightly.

Then, without warning, Kiyotaka reached for her book, snatching it from her hands without a care.

"Eh?"

There was a delay where she sat still, trying to absorb what just happened. But once it all clicked, she jumped in a panic.

"W-Wait, what are you—?"

He flipped it open to a random page, scanning a few lines before reading aloud in the most blank, monotone voice possible:

"Her breath hitched as his fingers traced her cheek, his heated gaze setting her heart ablaze. 'You are my eternal obsession' he whispered."

"Eeep!"

"I see," Kiyotaka said with complete seriousness.

Hiyori's entire face flared red—going thermonuclear.

"Y-Y-You—! Why did you pick that part?!"

"You told me to try it," he reminded her.

"N-Not that part!" she wailed.

Ignoring her distress, Kiyotaka casually flipped to another page and read:

"His lips hovered just above hers. 'I can't hold back anymore,' he murmured—"

Hiyori lunged across the table, snatching the book from his hands before he could finish. "Stop reading those p-passages!"

Kiyotaka met her flustered glare with his usual impassive expression. "They stood out the most."

"Because *you* chose them on purpose!"

He didn't deny it. Instead, he leaned his chin on his hand. "So—you enjoy reading things like this?"

Hiyori sputtered. "I-I told you, it's not just about the romance! It's about emotions, relationships—things that make life meaningful!"

Kiyotaka raised an eyebrow. "And military history doesn't?"

"It's different!" she insisted. "You wouldn't understand."

He exhaled softly, leaning back. "Then explain it to me."

Hiyori blinked.

"...You want me to explain *romance*?"

Kiyotaka gave a slight nod.

Her entire brain malfunctioned.

She fidgeted with the edge of her sleeve. "W-Well, um, it's... It's about feelings, you see! And, um, c-connections!"

Kiyotaka simply watched her flounder, finding it amusing.

Hiyori scowled, but she looked anything but threatening. "Y-You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?"

"Doing what?" he asked innocently.

"M-Making me all embarrassed!"

"I only asked a question."

Hiyori groaned, burying her face in her hands. "You're impossible, Kiyotaka-kun!"

A small silence ensued as Hiyori internally fumed.

While she was busy, an idea crossed Kiyotaka's mind.

Hiyori, having recovered from her spiral, reached out for her novel—

"E-Eh?"

But when she opened her eyes—it was gone.

Again.

And so was Kiyotaka.

She looked up.

And her eyes widened in horror.

"Kiyotaka-kun!" she yelped, leaping to her feet.

Already at the door, Kiyotaka's voice rang throughout the quiet library.

"'My body is yours,' she whispered, trembling—'"

"S-STOP!!"

She bolted after him in a panic.

Chiyoko, watching from the distance, smiled fondly at the scene.

While this was happening, Kaito and Rikuto were on their way to the Imperial Library.

"Hey, don't you think our uncle has been acting... off?"

Kaito raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know how to explain it, but he seems... distant."

"That's nothing new. He dotes on our sister the most; we're just an afterthought."

At first glance, what he said would normally be interpreted as resentment: this was not one of those cases.

Kaito didn't have any ill will towards his uncle—in fact, he respected the man.

His uncle's achievements were nothing to scoff at, especially at the young age he had earned them.

What he said was more of an observation. It's just how things were.

Their uncle had always been kind to him and Rikuto, treating them well as his nephews.

He just spent most of his time with Hiyori.

"That's the thing, though. Don't you think he would, you know, visit her more often—especially now?" Rikuto quizzed.

"Especially now?"

"Come on. You know what I'm talking about—that little runt."

Kaito sighed. "You really don't know what's going on in the IHA—do you, brother?"

Rikuto scratched the back of his head. "...Uh, no?"

"Well, if you were keeping up to date and actually doing your

duties, instead of spying on *teenagers*—"

"Hey, hey," Rikuto piped up. "Don't you dare act like the 'golden boy' now. You did that as well, alright?"

"Once—and that was on the day we met the boy. What about you, though? Care to confess?"

Rikuto looked away.

"That's what I thought."

"Alright, alright. Fine. Maybe I'm being biased here," Rikuto grumbled. "So tell me, wise one—what is going on in the IHA?"

Kaito narrowed his eyes. "Cut the tone. I'm still your older brother."

Rikuto scoffed. "There you go again with this older brother sh—Ow! Ow! Okay, okay!"

Pleased with the rehabilitation he had carried out, Kaito continued his explanation.

"As you know, our uncle is the Director-General of the IHA—a position he has held for many years."

Rikuto nodded.

"Well, that position was uncontested in the past, but that is no longer the case."

"What do you mean?"

"He has rivals now—strong ones."

"So?"

Kaito wanted to face palm. How could one be so shortsighted?

"*So*, he is very busy with internal politics. The rival faction's leader, Tōgō Shinichirō, is amassing a lot of support. Their 'election' for the position of Director-General is coming up. I would imagine our uncle is busy fending him off."

Rikuto rubbed his chin. "...I see. So that's why he's been so distant, huh."

"Probably," Kaito replied, climbing the steps to the library doors.

Just as he was about to open them, however—

BLAM.

A light-brown haired boy burst through, leaping over the stairs.

"Wha—What the hell?!" Rikuto yelled, startled by the boy. "Who—"

His words cut off abruptly as a girl soon followed. Her face flushed and voice high-pitched.

"Give it back!!"

Rikuto stumbled backwards. "H-Hiyori!?"

But she ignored him, electing to continue chasing after the boy.

Now staring at their retreating figures, Rikuto slowly regained his bearings.

"Don't tell me... Is that pretty boy bullying her again!?"

He was about to sprint after them, but—

"What do you think you're doing?"

Kaito grabbed Rikuto's forearm—tightly.

Rikuto looked over his shoulder. "Wha—Brother!? Why are you stopping me? Let me go—Ow! Ow!"

"Enough of this. You won't chase after them—understood?"

"What do you mean!? How long are you going to let him do this to our sister?"

With eyes full of disappointment, Kaito reprimanded his brother.

"For once, can you think with your head and not be so impulsive?"

Rikuto shook off Kaito's hand. "Fine. Tell me one good reason why I shouldn't chase after them."

Kaito sighed.

Instead of answering right away, he posed his own question.

"Look at them—do they remind you of anything?"

Rikuto's eyebrows furrowed. "What?"

"Chasing after one another—do you remember the last time we did that?"

"...In school. It was when we went to school," he murmured, looking away.

Kaito nodded. "You remember, right? The teachers used to always tell us not to run in the hallways. Those were some of our fondest memories."

"Yeah... But what does that have to do with anything?"

"Don't you see? Hiyori never got that chance."

Silence ensued.

And realisation dawned.

"Let them be kids."

That was Kaito's message in it's simplest form.

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Meanwhile, Hiyori, who had been chasing Kiyotaka through Imperial Gardens, came to a stop.

"He's... too... fast," she mumbled, gasping for air.

Physical activity was not one of her strong suits, so catching him was

already difficult.

Every time she thought she was in arm's reach of him, he increased his speed and slipped away.

Whether it was around benches, trees, or the koi pond—the outcome was the same.

Thinking this, whilst hunched over with her gaze trained on the floor, a shadow soon eclipsed her figure.

'Hm?'

Her head craned upwards.

"K-Kiyotaka?" she murmured, eyes wide.

Had he shown mercy? Had this boy, with such a cheeky personality, truly spared her from such trouble?

It certainly seemed that way.

The book was in arm's reach.

Staring at her—begging her to take it.

"You can have it," he said.

His face was unreadable. But was he being sincere?

She couldn't know.

This was Kiyotaka, after all.

With nothing to lose, though, she slowly reached out.

Then—

"Eh?"

The book drifted further away.

"*If* you can reach it," he added.

Hiyori's heart sank.

"Y-Y-You!!" she cried out, springing upwards.

Hiyori tried and tried, even jumping to try to close the distance, but whenever her fingertips were just inches from their target, he raised it higher.

"Give it back! You... You bully!"

The back and forth continued for a few moments, until she finally gave up.

Her gaze dropped. She realised she would have listen to him read out those embarrassing passages... again.

To her surprise, however, that was not what happened.

She suddenly felt a gentle pat on her head.

Hiyori froze.

Her head rose slowly.

And she saw an expression she hadn't seen before.

"Here," his voice came out as a gentle whisper.

Hiyori blinked.

Then blinked again.

She stole another glance.

His face was stoic, but his eyes were soft—softer than they had ever been.

She was certain, though.

'That... that was a smile.'

Not one of his rare smirks.

Not his robot look.

It was small, boyish, and only for a fleeting moment.

Yet it was more comforting than any other gesture.

Because any lingering insecurities she had disappeared.

He was enjoying his time with her as much as she was with him.

"...Thank you," she quietly mumbled, grabbing the book and avoiding his gaze.

Silence ensued.

The quiet would have been uncomfortable when they first met.

But not at this moment.

"Looks like we got carried away," Kiyotaka commented, looking away and at the setting sun.

Hiyori frowned. "Hmph. And who's fault is that?"

"Well... you did chase me."

"Y-You took my book!" Hiyori cried.

"I don't recall doing such a thing."

Hearing such a shameless remark, Hiyori's cheeks puffed up rapidly.

Their bickering continued, mainly consisting of Kiyotaka playing dumb and Hiyori becoming increasingly exasperated with his shameless attitude.

Eventually, it came to an end as the ambience of the night crept in.

"It's getting late. We should head back to our rooms. Tomorrow is your big day, after all."

Hiyori's eyebrows furrowed. "...Big day?"

"Don't tell me you forgot. We're visiting the city, remember?"

Hiyori felt her cheeks warm. "I-I knew that! I was just, um, testing you!"

"...Right."

"I'll get going then! Goodnight, Kiyotaka-kun!" Hiyori squeaked before leaving the scene.

'I'm such a ditz! How can I forget something so important!?'

She asked herself that on the way to her room, but realised the answer was obvious.

Her lips curved upwards.

As she tucked herself into the bed, the young girl found it difficult to fall asleep.

She couldn't stop thinking about the past week—and what awaited her.

Tomorrow, though so close, had never felt so far.

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Kiyotaka remained where he stood.

Hiyori had already left, but he found himself lingering.

Slowly, his fingers rose, brushing lightly across his cheek.

As if confirming something.

A moment passed. Then, without a word, he turned and walked away.

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Hope you enjoyed the chapter!

V1 - Chapter 8: The Mask Slips

Location: Imperial Palace, Tokyo

It was early morning.

The awaited day had arrived.

As scheduled, the concerned parties were gathered outside the palace's private residence.

"Papa... I'll be fine. Please, don't worry too much."

Kenzou tightened his embrace. "It's a father's job to worry, sweetheart."

He pulled back, his tender gaze meeting hers. "Let's go over the checklist—one more time, okay?"

Hiyori giggled. "Papaaa, we've gone over it a million times already!!"

"Please, angel?" he asked, brushing her cheek. "Just for this worrisome father of yours."

Hiyori huffed but smiled, nonetheless. "Fine."

Meanwhile—wearing a dark shirt, jeans, and casual shoes—Kiyotaka, with his hands tucked into his pockets, watched the familial affection unfold.

He heard a few steps behind him. A waft of perfume entering his nose.

"She's very lively, isn't she?"

Sayuri stood beside Kiyotaka, eyes shining at the scene.

Kiyotaka, not at all perturbed by her presence, nodded. "Yes, she is, Your Majesty."

"Please," she replied, glancing at Kiyotaka—expression warm. "Call me Sayuri. There is no need for formalities."

"...As you wish, Sayuri."

No words were exchanged for a moment—just the duo admiring the peaceful ambience of the fountain's crashing water.

"I just... wanted to thank you."

Kiyotaka blinked. "Thank me?"

"Yes. I know it was... selfish—Hiyori's request, I mean. You didn't have to accept—but you did. And I'm grateful for that."

He understood what she was referring to: Hiyori's plea to her father—the one that granted him residence in the palace.

At the time, he found it both surprising and unsurprising how quickly she had become attached.

For a girl who had been isolated her whole life, however, it was only natural.

Her eyes fell on her daughter. "These palace walls—they've been her home since she was born. Day after day, I dreaded what impact that would have on her."

She exhaled deeply. "School, friends, the joys of youth—I worried she would miss out on these experiences being trapped in this cage."

"But..." she trailed off, her lips curving upwards. "These past days... I've never seen her happier—I only have you to thank for that."

"...I see," Kiyotaka replied.

Another moment of silence.

Then—she turned to him. Her soft, violet eyes meeting his.

"I... I know this is an unseemly request. But could you please look out for her today? It's a big step forward for her, and I just want it to be memorable."

A plea.

Not an order from the Empress.

But an earnest request from a mother.

And for reasons unknown, it touched a part of himself he thought no longer existed.

"...I'll do my best."

Her expression brightened. "Thank you—really. It means a lot."

Meanwhile, steps below them, near the water fountain—

"Papa... I know how a phone works. Kiyotaka-kun showed me."

"Good. If anything happens you—"

"Call for our driver, or you, immediately. I know, Papa."

Kenzou sighed, reluctantly releasing her.

For a brief moment, Hiyori was allowed to breathe.

...Until her brothers stepped in. The gravel beneath their shoes crunching.

Kaito was first, patting her head gently. "Be safe, and don't wander off alone, little one."

"Yes, yes. I will, Kaito," Hiyori huffed.

Next to him, Rikuto stood, grumbling under his breath.

"And if *he*," Rikuto seethed, scowling at Kiyotaka from a distance, "does anything untoward, text us—no, text *me* immediately. I will *personally* teach him—"

Before he could continue, however, Kaito cut him off.

"I think that's enough, brother. Let's not spoil her mood today."

"But—"

"No."

"Tch. Fine."

With the click of his tongue, Rikuto left the scene—but not before shooting another glare at Kiyotaka.

Watching his retreating figure, Kaito sighed. "Sorry, little one. You know how he is. He means well but gets a little... carried away"

Hiyori shook her head. "No... it's okay. It's just that... Kiyotaka-kun is my friend, and he has been nothing but kind to me."

She looked to the side, her voice taking a lower tone. "Hearing him talk about Kiyotaka-kun like that... hurt."

"I know, little one," Kaito replied. "I'll deal with him, okay?"

Hiyori smiled. "Okay."

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Eventually, the farewells came to an end.

And the duo, Hiyori and Kiyotaka, found themselves seated in the back seats of a black sedan—silently observing the passing scenery.

Kiyotaka, looking away from the tinted windows, peeked at Hiyori from the corner of his eyes.

"What's wrong, Hiyori?" he asked, noticing Hiyori's disheartened expression.

Hiyori flinched. "E-Eh? It's nothing..."

Looking away from the cityscape, she sighed softly.

"It's just... my Uncle Issei," she whispered. "I was hoping he would come to see me."

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Location: Imperial Household Agency, Tokyo.

Meanwhile, in a dark room surrounded by the flickering of monitors and the clicking of typing keys—a measured voice emerged.

"Sir," Ishikawa called out, his chair creaking as it turned around. "I have just received confirmation from our spies: the targets have left the palace as scheduled."

His direct superior, Issei—with his hands behind his back—nodded.

"Good. And what of their travel route?"

Ishikawa cleared his throat. "So far, they seem to be following their planned itinerary and aren't straying too far away from the palace."

"Excellent. Keep me informed of any changes. We will adjust our plans accordingly in such an event."

"Yes sir," Ishikawa replied, turning back to his monitor.

Taking that as his cue to leave, Issei stepped towards the other side of the room, noticing that his subordinate, Kuroda, had finished his phone call.

"Kuroda," he called out, his tone sharp. "Status report."

"Ah," Kuroda replied, startled momentarily. "Of course, Boss."

His posture straightened. "I've just contacted our *friends*. They've been briefed on the *new* plan of attack, which Itachi drafted, and have no issues with it."

Issei's eyebrows furrowed.

'New strategy?'

He mulled over it briefly but sidelined the question for now. Itachi could clarify later.

"Can they be trusted?" he asked.

Kuroda smirked. "Yes. We have procured their... *services* in the past. They will follow our instructions to a tee, even with the limited information they have—no questions asked."

Blackmail, abductions, assassinations disguised as accidents—the men in this room had orchestrated such actions using the IHA's connections.

No punishment ever came their way; they were too careful—cautious.

As such, their rewards soared with each advancement.

But with success comes confidence.

Too much confidence, however, leads to arrogance.

Arrogance creates mistakes.

This was too *delicate* of a case to risk any half-measures.

And Issei was in no mood to deal with any *unexpected* variables.

"Remember," Issei warned, inching closer. "If this operation is unsuccessful—"

Now only a step away, he continued, "and *she* is harmed in *any* way..."

He paused, his figure towering over Kuroda. "It will be your neck on the line—got it?"

Kuroda gulped, looking away. "...Yes, Boss. I understand."

"Good."

Slowly, he moved away from Kuroda and glanced around the room, looking for Itachi—the last person he wanted to consult.

'There he is.'

"Itachi," he called out, opening the sliding door to a smaller office. "I heard from Kuroda there has been a change in strategy. Is that true?"

Images, maps, routes—all scattered on the walls.

And in the middle, Itachi stood.

"Yes," Itachi replied, turning to meet Issei's gaze. "It seems that the protests around the National Diet have grown more than anticipated. Major roads leading to and from there have been closed off."

The creases on Issei's forehead deepened.

"Will it be a problem?"

Itachi shook his head. "Not necessarily."

Stepping towards the map of Tokyo posted on the wall, he pointed to the areas circled in red.

"As you know, these are the places of interest that are targets will visit: they're all situated only kilometres away from the Imperial Palace to conform with His Majesty's condition."

Issei nodded. "I'm aware. My brother wanted it that way so that a quick escape would be feasible."

The Emperor, Kenzou—although having conceded to his wife's wishes —did not slack when it came to Hiyori's safety.

There was only one place that was safest for Hiyori: the Imperial Palace.

As such, being able to reach it quickly was necessary.

With that constraint, however, their options were scarce.

"Correct. But since the National Diet is relatively close to the Imperial

Palace, the roads being closed off required us to make... *changes*."

Issei's foot started tapping the floor. "Get to the point, Itachi."

"The point is that, with the roads being blocked and the public's focus being drawn to the protests, we are able to move around with more... *flexibility*."

"Meaning?"

"Once the targets enter the sealed off area, their security team won't be able to use their vehicle for a quick getaway; that is critical for my new strategy."

He cleared his throat.

"This," he continued, pointing at a circled landmark, "is Yotsuka Park, one of the key locations of interest that is situated on the cusp of the region sealed off by the road closures."

Looking over his shoulder, Itachi met Issei's gaze. "Once they enter this zone, a quick escape won't be possible."

Since the targets' identities were concealed from the public, personal bodyguards were redundant. Their presence would attract too much attention.

Even if the security team were disguised and monitoring from a distance on the ground, it wouldn't matter—the targets would still have to reach their getaway vehicle to escape.

With the public's attention focused on the protests, civilian foot traffic through the park and the area would be minimal; the operation would be less conspicuous.

Issei soon reached these conclusions.

"...I see. So, you plan to trap them in Yotsuka Park?"

Itachi nodded. "Exactly. Our operatives are already waiting in the park, ready to encircle them when they enter. As a contingency, the tail that we set on the targets will cut of their retreat when they enter

through the main entrance, removing all their escape routes."

Gardeners, maintenance workers, security officers: they were some of the disguises the men would wear—waiting in ambush.

"Once they realise, it will be too late. Our encirclement will have already forced them into a position of our choosing. Capturing them will be easy from there."

Issei smiled, impressed by the ingenuity of the plan.

"A pincer movement, huh," he murmured.

The strategy that Itachi had developed was complex.

Due to the constraints, however, it was the only feasible plan.

Extreme measures, such as attacking the targets' getaway vehicle, could not be used.

The Princess could not be harmed. That was an absolute that could not be overturned.

"Good work."

Satisfied with the strategy, Issei left Itachi to his own devices, electing to monitor the situation in the main room.

'All seems to be proceeding smoothly, but...'

Even now, he felt torn.

He shook his head, ignoring the conflict stirring within him.

'What's done is done. I need to focus.'

"Ishikawa," he called out. "Where are they now?"

□□□□□□□ ✧ [M][A][C][H][I][N][A][T][I][O][N][S] ✧ □□□□□□□

Location: Tokyo, Japan

Ting.

1-0.

Ting.

2-0

Ting.

3-0.

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...

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Ting

For the *seventh* consecutive time, the puck sank in her goal.

Hiyori flailed her arms.

"Hmph. No fair!!" she cried out.

"Hm?"

Hiyori glared at Kiyotaka from across the machine. "Don't 'Hm' me!! Aren't you supposed to take it easy on me?!"

"Why would I do that?"

Hiyori spluttered.

"B-Because it's, um... my first time playing!" she stammered. "So... so you're supposed to let me win!"

He gave her a look. "This isn't one of your romance novels, *Princess*."

"K-Kiyotaka-kun!!" she squeaked. Her eyes widening like saucers.

"Yes?"

"Y-You can't say that!!"

"Can't say what?" he asked, putting the puck beater down.

"That!!"

"What?"

"*You know*!!"

"No, I don't, *Princess,*" he teased, walking around the machine and towards her.

"Uwahh. Y-You're so mean!!"

She crossed her arms, looking away dramatically.

"You never let me win..."

She kicked the floor with her heel, sulking.

They had entered the arcade over an hour ago.

But since that moment?

Losses.

Losses upon losses.

Every machine, no matter how hard she tried—the taste of victory always evaded her.

As long as *he* was her opponent, that fate seemed absolute.

Of course, she was still thoroughly enjoying her time.

She had, after all, fulfilled one of her heart's desires: seeing the outside world.

Any second spent away from her cage was time well spent.

Despite that, however, there was still that childish wish of hers to compete against her friend.

'Just onceee. Just once, I want to see him troubled by a loss!!'

But maybe it was time to quit. They had other activities planned anyway.

"Is there anything else you want to try?" Kiyotaka asked.

"What's the point? You'll just beat me again."

"Well... there's nothing wrong with that, right?"

Hiyori harrumphed. "Bully."

"That's rather harsh, don't you think?"

"No. I think it perfectly describes you."

"I'm deeply hurt, *Princess*."

Hiyori glanced at his face for a moment, then pouted.

"L-Let's just go," Hiyori muttered, trudging towards the exit.

"Baka Robot-face," she whispered under her breath.

Given her gentle nature, such remarks would normally be out-of-character.

Spending enough time with this mischievous boy, however, had brought out another side of her.

'Hm?'

Just as they were about to exit, she paused.

Infront of her was another arcade machine.

But this one was different from the others she had seen.

It was a tall rectangular box with two distinct halves.

The top portion was sealed by thick glass, and a large steel claw was mounted to the roof.

At the bottom, there was a dispenser, and three joysticks, presumably

used to manoeuvre the grappling device in the three directions of motion.

These details, however, weren't what caught her attention.

It was the stuffed animals trapped inside.

Without realising, she started bouncing on her heels, peering at the different plushies from each angle of the machine.

Her eyes sparkled. "Ooh, that one—it's so cute!!"

It was a Korilakkuma, dressed in a fuzzy cat onesie.

Kiyotaka followed her gaze.

"You want it?"

"W-What?! N-No! I was just saying it's cute, that's all!!"

"Hm."

Without another word, he slid a coin into the machine.

"Wha—Kiyotaka-kun, wait—!"

The machine whirred, coming back to life.

Ignoring her protests, Kiyotaka used the first two joysticks to adjust the claw's position.

Left. Right. Up. Down.

He had never tried the claw machine before; however, it seemed rather straightforward.

Having aligned the claw with the plushie, he used the third joystick to slowly lower it.

Hiyori, watching closely, felt her heart thump faster.

Lower.

Lower.

Lower.

Then—it made contact.

She gasped.

The plushie was wedged—ready.

He raised the claw.

Manoeuvred it towards the dispenser.

Slowly.

Gently.

Calmly.

But then—disaster struck.

The plushie fell down.

Hiyori blinked once.

Twice.

She glanced at Kiyotaka, witnessing the creases on his forehead take root.

And couldn't hold back her laughter anymore.

"Ehehe, looks like even *you* can't win at everything," she teased.

Kiyotaka frowned.

"It was on purpose," he replied shamelessly. "So you don't mope."

"Mhm. Sure, sure."

His frown deepened.

She giggled harder.

In a way, her little wish had been fulfilled: Kiyotaka was *finally* troubled by a loss.

'Still, it's the thought that counts.'

Even if he didn't say it, she thought it was rather sweet that he was trying to cheer her up—in his own Kiyotaka way, of course.

"It's okay, Kiyotaka-kun. I don't mind—"

She suddenly stopped herself, too shocked to continue.

The plushie—that she saw sealed away just minutes ago—was now in front of her eyes.

"Here," Kiyotaka said nonchalantly.

"E-Eh?"

She looked at him.

Then at the plushie.

And then back at him.

"F-For me?" she asked, dumbly.

Kiyotaka gave her a look. "It's *definitely* not for me."

"B-But—"

"Hiyori. It's yours. You wanted it, right?"

And just like that, she forgot all about her losses.

All about his teasing antics.

All about his dry and sarcastic remarks.

Because no matter what was said, in the end, he always made her feel special.

"T-Thank you... Kiyotaka-kun."

Her chest tightened. She clutched the plushie like it was the most precious thing she'd ever received.

The soft fur warmed her fingertips and insides.

And her cheeks and heart bloomed.

'Kiyotaka-kun... you really are unfair.'

Always watching. Always noticing. Always making her feel seen.

Playful but undoubtedly kind.

That was the type of person he was.

And she hoped that that wouldn't change.

Because she treasured him—immensely.

Just as those thoughts filled her mind, however, she noticed him go quiet.

She glanced up, her lips parting slightly.

His eyes—once playful and golden—had shifted.

They were no longer teasing. No longer soft.

They were distant. Calculating.

He was looking *pas*t her.

"Kiyotaka-kun?" she asked softly, confused.

He didn't answer.

He just stared—still and focused.

Hiyori hesitated. Then slowly turned to see what he was staring at.

But there was nothing.

Just an empty row of arcade machines and blinking lights.

"Is something wrong?"

A moment passed.

"Nothing is wrong," he replied calmly. "Shall we get going, then?"

Hiyori nodded her head—slowly.

For the first time, she felt uneasy.

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Half an hour had passed since the duo had left the arcade.

They were walking towards their next destination: Yotsuka Park.

"The city—it's not as busy as I thought it would be," Hiyori mused, almost skipping along the pavement.

Bustling footpaths, packed roads, impatient pedestrians—she had expected such sights.

For Tokyo, the capital of Japan, that would be the norm.

Today, however, reality was different.

"A lot of the major roads in this area have been closed, at least for a couple days," Kiyotaka explained, just a few steps behind her. "It's probably because of that."

"Closed?" she asked, looking over her shoulder.

Kiyotaka nodded. "The protests near the National Diet have deemed it necessary. They have obtained an unprecedented amount of support. That is why it's not as busy as it usually is."

"I see..." Hiyori mumbled, clutching her plushie closer to her chest.

Without properly explaining, her father had given strict instructions to avoid the National Diet building.

Now she knew why.

It was easy to get lost amongst the crowd, after all.

Knowing how overprotective he was, Hiyori could guess her father's thoughts.

Still, the scenario had piqued her curiosity.

"What are they protesting about?"

Given her isolation, she wasn't too up to date with what was going on in Japan, let alone the world.

Rumours, murmurs, whispers—she had only gathered the very basics from eavesdropping on her family or the palace staff.

"The amendment of Article 9 of the Constitution, the National Diet's incompetence, and—"

His voice cut off abruptly.

"And?" Hiyori asked, waiting in anticipation.

But no response came.

Puzzled by his silence, Hiyori turned around. "Kiyotaka-kun?"

Her lips parted.

Eyebrows furrowed.

'He... he has that same look.'

It was the same one from just before they left the arcade.

His gaze suddenly snapped to hers.

"Hiyori. Call for the driver."

A sudden request.

But also, very strange.

The park was only steps away.

There would be no need for the driver.

"E-Eh? B-But—"

"Do it. Now."

Hiyori recoiled.

He had never used such a sharp tone with her.

"O-Okay," she whispered.

The phone rang.

Multiple times.

But no one picked up.

"...He didn't answer," she murmured.

"Try your father's number," Kiyotaka replied instantly.

Once.

Twice.

Thrice.

Straight to voicemail.

Hiyori's heart sank.

It was inconceivable that her father wouldn't answer her call—especially on today of all days.

The uneasiness in her chest resurfaced.

"H-He didn't answer, either," she stuttered, her heart racing.

Kiyotaka's jaw clenched. Tightly.

Without hesitation, he approached Hiyori.

"Eep!"

Sweeping her off her feet and holding her bridal style, he darted towards the road closure barriers.

"K-Kiyotaka-kun?" she squeaked.

He ignored her. His attention was elsewhere.

And when Hiyori turned her head—

She understood Kiyotaka's strange actions.

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Meanwhile, just behind them, two men broke out into a sprint—pushing aside any bystanders as they vaulted over the road-closure barriers.

"This way! This way! They ran this way!" a man with a powerful build shouted, looking over his shoulder. His hastened steps echoing against the footpath.

Trailing further behind him, a different man spoke into his earpiece, "This is Hiroto from Team One. Targets are in the wind! They've avoided the extraction point! Daisuke and I are in pursuit. Requesting support."

Hearing Hiroto's desperate words, a startled voice emerged from the communication device. "What!? Shit! This is Takashi from Team Two. What the fuck happened?"

What had occurred was obvious; Hiroto and Daisuke had been spotted by the targets.

Despite that, however, there was no sign of the targets' security team.

That meant they must not be in a position to act—not yet at least.

With that in mind, Hiroto couldn't let this opportunity slip, especially when their cover had been blown.

"There is no time to explain. We need backup—immediately."

A few seconds passed before a response reached his ears.

"This is Takashi from Team Two. The other teams are too far away to make a move. But Gou and I are moving in to assist. The extraction vehicle had to be ditched, but we're not too far away from your position. We're cutting the targets off from the opposite direction."

"Affirmative, Takashi. Hiroto out."

With long and decisive strides, Hiroto continued the chase. His heart pounding with each step.

Given the protests occurring outside the National Diet building, there weren't as many civilians in this area as there normally would be. That made things easier and relatively less conspicuous.

Although the original strategy had been to encircle the targets in Yotsuka Park, having a backup plan was crucial in this line of work; Hiroto knew that well.

'Still. The kid's got some serious pace.' Hiroto thought.

Mere meters became city blocks in quick succession.

Jumping over the barrier and running at such speed—all while carrying a person—was no easy feat for a normal teenager.

Despite that, however, the probability of success was still high.

Even now, there was no sign of the targets' security team; that worked in their favour.

Height, weight, reach—against mere teenagers, they possessed all the physiological advantages.

Factoring in their numbers and skill in combat, extraction of the targets would be inevitable.

As long as they steered clear of the National Diet, where the police were gathered to monitor the protests, the situation should not worsen.

All other outcomes resulted in completion of the contract.

Hiroto sincerely believed this.

Eventually, he caught up to Daisuke, who had come to a stop at a T-intersection. Beside him were Gou and Takashi from Team Two.

'Looks like the kid's out of stamina.'

That was what he hoped, at least, since all three of his colleagues—Daisuke, Takashi, and Gou—were hunched over, with their hands resting on their knees.

"Daisuke," he said, catching his own breath. "What's the situation?"

Daisuke craned his neck upwards. "They're trapped in this alleyway on the left... Haah... I'm familiar with this area. That opening is the only way in and out."

He pointed towards the gap on the left of the T-intersection's terminating road.

Hiroto, after glancing at the entrance to the alleyway, felt his shoulders relax. "Good. Takashi, Gou—any news on your end?"

"Nah," Takashi replied, his gaze meeting Hiroto's. "We cut the targets off as intended and didn't spot any sign of their security team. I think we're in the clear, for now."

They stood in silence for a moment. Although there was a strict timeframe, they could spare a few seconds before making a move. The targets weren't going anywhere, after all.

Stretching and fully rested, Gou spoke, "So how should we do this? I'm ready to get this done."

"Well, our orders are to bring them to the rendezvous point an hour from now—alive," Hiroto replied, glancing at his wristwatch. "The girl must be unharmed. But the boy... well, there's some... *flexibility*."

Gou smirked, cracking his knuckles. "Should we rough him up a bit, then? Teach the brat a lesson for running away?"

Hiroto looked hesitant. "There is no need to drag this out. Even if there aren't many eyes in the area that may interfere, their security team could arrive at any moment. We've already drawn enough suspicion as it is by running through the streets."

Takashi, listening in, nodded. "I agree. Let's wrap this up—quickly and quietly. They're just kids; threats should be enough to get the job done."

With that, the four men entered the T-intersection's terminating road, swiftly approaching the narrow alleyway on the left.

Takashi led the charge, with Gou and Daisuke following closely behind and Hiroto being the furthest back.

'Like rats caught in a trap.' Hiroto thought.

Turning the corner, however, they were met with a strange sight.

"Huh? Where's the girl?" Gou asked, his eyebrows scrunching up.

The alleyway was narrow and dimly lit.

Broken pipes, rubbish, pebbles—all scattered on the floor.

At the back, surrounded by brick walls, was a large garbage bin.

And in front of them, a light-brown haired boy stood.

But there was no sign of the girl.

Hiroto scoffed.

It was obvious to Hiroto that the girl was hiding. The most likely spot was behind the large garbage bin.

He glanced at the boy.

'Is this kid really trying to be a hero?'

Their payload was completely cornered.

Resistance was futile—the boy was outnumbered, and they were adults.

Hiroto concluded as such.

Takashi, first to act, walked steadily towards the boy. His posture relaxed as he put on dark, rubber gloves. "There is no point hiding. Tell your little girlfriend to come out. If you both follow our instructions, no harm will come."

Step.

Step.

Step.

Yet, as he inched closer, the boy remained stationary—expressionless.

Seeing the boy's abnormal behaviour, Hiroto felt a ripple of unease in his heart.

"Hello?" Takashi asked, now in *striking* distance. "Are you deaf? I said —"

His words cut off abruptly.

"Gaaah," Takashi groaned, disoriented by the unexpected jab to his trachea.

His hands instinctively reached for his throat—leaving his midsection *exposed.*

At breakneck speed, the boy L-stepped and delivered a body shot aimed at his liver.

Takashi immediately crumpled to his knees—winded.

He was unable to make a sound—the earlier blow to his windpipe, and his now shut down diaphragm, leaving him gasping for air.

With Takashi's head lower, the boy stepped inwards, his knee rocketing up with his forward momentum.

Hitting Takashi square on the underside of his chin.

CRRRRK.

His head snapped backward, his spine arced unnaturally, his neck twisted at an angle it shouldn't have.

And then—he collapsed flat on the ground.

The back of his dome landing on the hard, concrete floor.

Hiroto shivered.

'W-W-What?'

All of those blows... in mere seconds.

That halted both Hiroto and Daisuke.

Hesitance coursed through their veins as they reevaluated the boy.

Gou, however, charged in next—undeterred by what he had seen.

His eyes were bloodshot.

"You fucking bastard!" he yelled, his burly body twisting as he threw a wild, rear hook.

Seeing the telegraphed attack, the boy sidestepped the blow. His loose strands of hair fluttered as the punch swept through the empty air.

In prime position, the boy then caught the man's forearm mid-swing, pivoting with his heel to use the man's own weight against him.

THUMP.

Gou hurtled head-first into the nearest wall.

He stumbled backwards—dazed and off-balance—crying out in pain as blood trickled down his forehead.

But despite the horrific sight, the boy did not hesitate for a moment.

Delivering a low kick to the LCL, he dropped Gou to his knees.

Clinical.

Precise.

Fast.

Every attack thus far had been calculated with those factors in mind.

This time, however, the boy took a *different* approach.

He grabbed Gou by the back of his head.

Then—he drove Gou face-first into the wall.

SMASH.

Again.

SMASH.

Again.

SMASH.

And *again*.

CRACK.

Blood splattered against the brick.

A spray. Then a smear. Then a pool.

Gou's body sagged.

The boy let go.

And Gou hit the floor, face-first, unconscious.

For a second—nobody moved.

Not even the boy.

'O-Oh my God,' Hiroto thought.

Takashi was taken down quickly—efficiently.

But this... this was just *brutality*.

And when the boy turned to face them—

He felt the hairs along the back of his neck stand on end.

No remorse.

No satisfaction.

No thrill.

Nothing of the sort—just *indifference*.

Hiroto paled, realisation dawning.

Driving fear into their hearts. Disorienting their emotions. Paralysing them in terror.

All to ensure they were easier to pick off—one by one.

A human would not have brutalised his colleagues for those reasons.

Those were the actions of a hunter—

A predator.

'W-Wait, were we always the prey?'

The more he thought about it, the more terrifying this... *thing* became.

'Leading us into this narrow alleyway... away from any interference.'

Walls to guard the rear and prevent encirclement.

Walls to force one-on-one fights.

Walls to protect *any* weaknesses.

The advantages they once possessed—gone. In a single move.

"W-What do we do, Hiroto?" Daisuke whispered, clearly as shaken as he was.

Hiroto couldn't respond, though.

He was still at a loss—shocked.

How could they have known that a teenage boy was capable of *this*?

His instincts screamed at him to *run*.

To get away from *it*.

But there was no escape.

They had borne their fangs first.

They had unmasked the beast.

And now—*they* had to pay the price.

Because a wolf among sheep does not spare its prey.

□□□□□□□ ✧ 🅼🅰🅲🅷🅸🅽🅰🆃🅸🅾🅽🆂 ✧ □□□□□□□

Eyes shut.

Ears covered.

Knees to her face.

Just meters away, Hiyori was crouched behind the large garbage bin.

And like the verses in the Bible, she chanted *his* words—repeatedly.

"You must hide here and not move until I come back."

"Keep your eyes shut and ears covered."

"And no matter what you hear—"

"Don't look."

Those were his instructions.

And at the start—she wanted to obey.

She *really* did.

She knew that it was for her own safety.

That he was out there protecting her from harm.

That he wouldn't let anything happen to her.

That he would be okay.

'He promised he would. I trust him. I trust him.'

But then—the *noises* emerged.

Snap.

First it was that—like something *breaking*.

Her hands clamped down harder on her ears.

As much as humanly possible.

But she still heard them.

She couldn't *not* hear them.

'H-He'll be okay. He'll be okay. He p-promised.'

Another noise. A *thud*.

Then a groan.

Then a *scream*—one from the *soul*.

Ba-dump. Ba-dump. Ba-dump. Ba-dump. Ba-dump.

She squeezed her eyes *tighter*.

What was happening?

What was that *sound* just now?

Was that a voice?

Was it *his*?

She couldn't tell anymore.

Her heartbeat was too *loud*.

Thumping against her chest over and over.

But the noises—they didn't stop.

Didn't *end*.

And soon—dread and doubt reared their ugly heads.

Hiyori's fingers dug into her scalp.

'P-Please be okay. Please be okay. Please be okay.

THUMP.

Something *slammed* against the wall.

Again.

And again.

And *again*.

CRACK.

She inhaled sharply.

Her fingers curled *tighter*.

Her knees pulled in closer.

"W-What if... what if it's him? What if he's hurt—because of m-me?'

Her stomach twisted.

Another scream—closer now.

And another.

And another.

Then—a wet, *sickening* noise.

SPLAT.

Her breathing turned ragged.

She was shaking.

Her palms, once pressed to her ears—*slipped*.

Not because she wanted to hear.

But because her body... just couldn't hold on anymore.

And then—

Nothing.

No voices.

No groans.

No steps.

Just... the quiet to keep her company.

She choked back a whimper.

"K-Kiyotaka-kun...?" she whispered—barely audible.

But there was no reply.

Only silence.

And that silence was worse than the sounds.

Because at least when there was noise—he was alive.

But now?

'No. No. No. No. No.'

Her hands trembled. Her vision blurred. Her chest ached.

'Kiyotaka-kun... p-please—'

A tear rolled down her cheek.

And slowly—her body began to move.

Just a peek.

Just to make sure.

Just to know he's okay.

She opened her eyes.

Turned her head.

Stood up.

And looked.

"..."

Her lips parted—but no sound came out.

The plushie, clutched tightly to her chest, slipped.

Hitting the floor with a gentle thud.

Her lips quivered as the strong stench of iron entered her nose.

Four bodies—limp, unconscious, *disfigured*.

One by the wall splattered in crimson. His battered face submerged in a pool of red.

One staring up at the sky. His neck twisted unnaturally.

And the last two—nose-deep in the damp, concrete floor.

Legs broken.

Fingers sprawled outwards.

As if they were trying to crawl away.

Trying to *escape*.

Before a *beast* inevitably devoured them.

"N-No..." she murmured, trembling slightly.

Her feet refused to move.

Her throat refused to swallow.

Her mind refused to understand.

The reality in front of her eyes—she *denied* it.

It just couldn't be real.

Kiyotaka-kun wouldn't do this.

Not after everything.

The first meeting.

The time spent at the palace.

The teasing.

The smile.

The plushie.

No.

The Kiyotaka-kun she knew could never do *this*.

He was mischievous, kind, caring—

And human.

But there he stood.

The harbinger of this *savagery*.

His back to her.

Holding a metal pipe.

Unharmed.

Hiyori inhaled sharply.

Her knees wobbled slightly.

Then, as if sensing someone watching him—

He turned around.

Their gazes met.

"..."

He just stared—blankly.

But she could see the cogs moving.

He blinked once.

Twice.

Thrice.

Almost like a computer registering new stimuli.

His mouth opened—then closed.

"..."

But the words couldn't come out.

Like a machine frozen mid-command.

He took a singular step forward.

Hiyori flinched, instinctively taking a step back.

He immediately paused.

His gaze lowered—

And his shoulders went slack.

Clang.

The metal pipe slipped from his bloodied fingers.

Rolling along the ground toward the wall.

"..."

He raised his head, meeting her eyes again.

But this time—for only a moment—

She saw something... *foreign*.

His right hand slowly raised—

As if reaching out to her.

"Hiyori... I—"

But he stopped himself.

His head snapped to the left—mechanically.

Footsteps.

Dozens.

Heavy.

Closing in.

His jaw clenched.

And just as quickly, his expression changed back.

"We need to move. Now."

But Hiyori didn't move. Not immediately.

She was still processing.

"..."

Her eyes flicked downward.

The plushie lay near her feet.

Slowly, shakily, she bent down and picked it up.

And clutched it to her chest.

It was still warm. Still soft.

But it didn't feel the same anymore.

She glanced at Kiyotaka—his back already turned.

The boy who had teased her. Protected her.

The boy who had done... *this*.

Her hands trembled.

But her feet moved forward.

And that was all that was needed.

For now.

****

Hope you enjoyed the chapter!

V1 - Chapter 9: The Day of Infamy

Location: Imperial Household Agency, Tokyo

Flashing monitors.

The clicking of keys.

Tension in the air.

And amidst all this, a tentative voice emerged.

"Sir," Ishikawa called out, his seat creaking as it turned. "The targets have avoided the extraction point—Team One's cover has been blown. They are currently in pursuit on foot, with Team Two moving in to assist."

Issei's eyebrows furrowed.

Team One—the two-man tail—was meant to cut off their retreat at Yotsuka Park.

"Is the tracking device still functioning correctly?" he asked.

Ishikawa nodded. "Team Two have their exact location and are aiming to cut them off before they can escape."

Contingencies were always necessary in any plan.

In the event things went sideways, and Team One had lost sight of the targets, the tracker planted on the Princess's phone would always reveal their location.

Encircling the targets in Yotsuka Park had always been the ideal outcome.

The need for a backup strategy, however, was paramount in this line of work.

"Relay the same instructions to the other teams—they should relocate and prepare for exfil."

"Yes, sir."

"I will wait for the good news, then."

Time passed.

And eventually, Ishikawa broke the silence. "Sir," he said, still facing the monitors. "I've received confirmation from Team One and Two, the targets are pinned with no escape—they are moving in for extraction as we speak."

Issei smiled. "Excellent."

He took a few steps back, pleased with himself.

And he waited.

And waited.

And *waited*.

"..."

But only silence ensued.

And his patience waned.

"Ishikawa," he barked. "What's taking so long?"

Ishikawa's shoulders tensed—a bead of sweat trickled down his forehead. "I-I'm not sure... They should be finished by now."

Unease crept in.

The targets were just teenagers.

Resistance was an impossibility.

Yet, instinctively, Issei felt something was wrong.

"The—the other teams will be there shortly. We'll know what the holdup is soon enough," Ishikawa continued.

Issei started pacing.

Seconds.

Minutes.

But the line remained dead—no update, no audio, no assurances.

Then—the truth arrived.

Ishikawa paled.

"S-Sir... I just received new information. Team's One and Two are—well, I think you should see for yourself."

Issei turned sharply, briskly returning to the monitors.

"Finally. Now, what seems to be the—"

He stopped himself.

What he saw—words would not be enough to describe.

The recorded footage revealed something inhuman.

Something *monstrous*.

"...My God."

Teams One and Two were *decimated*.

He looked away, shaking away the images.

But they lingered.

Taunting him.

Gnawing at him.

He exhaled deeply.

Once.

Twice.

Then—he regained some control. "...What's the situation now?"

Ishikawa looked over his shoulder. "We—we have Teams Three and Four in pursuit of the targets, but—"

"But what!?"

Ishikawa flinched. "The targets ran towards the protests... they ditched their phone in the crowd."

Issei froze.

A long silence followed.

"...They ditched their phone?"

Not discarded. Not lost. *Ditched.*

Deliberately.

"Y-Yes," Ishikawa replied, attempting to steady his voice. "But they couldn't have travelled far, s-so it's not an issue—"

SMASH.

Glass shattered against the wall.

Its tiny shards sprinkling along the floor.

Ishikawa recoiled, shrinking into his seat.

He had never seen his superior like this.

Furious.

Raging.

Out of control.

Curses soon followed.

Frustration, anger, and anything negative—Issei released it all.

Until only the quiet held the room hostage.

He pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Where are they now?"

Ishikawa shivered at the eerie calmness in his tone.

"W-Well, our operatives are following their trail through Shinsakura Avenue—"

Although he had asked, Ishikawa's words dissipated into the background.

Instead, his mind raced.

There was no way his niece, Hiyori, was capable of such carnage.

The boy must be behind it; he was calling the shots.

Running towards the protesters.

Deducing the phone was a tracking device.

And then throwing it away, despite it being their only chance of acquiring help.

Through this analysis, the boy's goal became clearer to Issei.

"...The National Diet."

There was a small pause.

"The National Diet, s-sir?"

"Yes," he answered, pointing at the screen. "They're... using the protests to reach the authorities."

Absurd capacity for violence, consistent rational judgement, flawless decision making—all in mere seconds.

For any teenager in the same circumstances—it was alien.

Despite that, however, Issei realised that the boy's actions were conducted to protect his niece.

With those facts, and considering the current trajectory of their pathing, he was sure that this was the boy's motive.

Realisation dawned in Ishikawa's eyes. "I-I see."

"Inform the others. They must close the distance—immediately. We must not allow them to reach the police."

Issei walked away before Ishikawa could reply.

He couldn't have foreseen a circumstance where his operatives were overpowered.

A normal teenager against four adults—victory was the only possibility.

In a normal world, that is.

There was one factor that he had overlooked.

The boy carried *that man's* blood.

When that's put in the equation, controlling the output became difficult.

Removing their means of knowing an exact location, using the protests as camouflage, travelling towards the National Diet building monitored by the police.

No... perhaps even luring Teams One and Two had been within *his* calculations.

Issei felt a cold shiver run down his spine.

Just how far ahead had this boy thought?

'Another unexpected and dangerous variable.'

First the father, now the son.

Both existences that had interrupted his plans.

Threatening a complete failure of his operations.

Issei gritted his teeth.

'I won't allow anymore interference.'

There was too much on the line.

The cliff's edge was steps away.

And he swore he would not fall.

No matter the cost.

□□□□□□□ ✧ MACHINATIONS ✧ □□□□□□□

Location: Tokyo, Japan

Bustling footpaths.

Packed roads.

Chatter in the air.

And amidst all this, Kiyotaka navigated the gaps in the crowds—his grip firm yet gentle on Hiyori's wrist.

He glanced over his left shoulder, scanning the sea of protesters.

'No sign of them.'

It was hard to make out definitively whether they had lost their tail or not.

For now, though, slipping Hiyori's phone into a random protester's backpack seemed to have worked as intended.

Attempts to procure aid through it had been futile. It held no conventional value.

But if his suspicions were correct—there was a tracking device embedded in it.

And that was exploitable.

The primary objective was to ensure his and her safety.

Hiding was an option, but created risks if they were found. The extent of their pursuers' operation was still unknown.

Reaching the National Diet remained the safest choice.

To ensure success, however, leeway on their pursuers was necessary.

He had already anticipated that these assailants would deduce his motives.

It wasn't a question of *if* but rather *when*.

Because the moment they realised, they would become more determined—more reckless.

So, any chance to buy time had to be used.

He turned a corner, his gaze hardening at the new landscape.

'There it is.'

The National Diet—standing proudly in the distance.

It wasn't too far now.

They were making steady progress, given the circumstances.

Blending in with the crowd meant that carrying Hiyori was not an option.

With that, their pace was slower than before.

He looked to the right for a moment.

'...Still quiet.'

Since leaving the alleyway, she hadn't said a word.

Her gaze was low, fixated on the ground.

Solemn, distant, detached.

A complete contrast to her earlier appearance.

His jaw clenched.

'Now is not the time.'

Adding any more variables would compromise the objective.

Keeping control was imperative.

And time was a luxury they couldn't afford.

Physical safety trounced emotional wellbeing.

Kiyotaka knew that well.

Step.

Step.

Step.

As they inched closer, the crowds became denser.

And chants from the megaphones became louder.

"Enough debate! Enough delay!"

"Article Nine is past its time! Give Japan the right to fight!"

Just by looking, it was evident how popular the movement had become.

Men, women, children.

There was no limit on demographic.

"The Diet stalls!

"The people fall!"

"We need a leader to save us all!"

Banners, signs, slogans.

All emblazoned with different messages, like:

"Our Safety, Our Strength—Reform Article 9!"

"From Silence to Sovereignty—Rewrite the Constitution Now!"

"We Support Ayanokōji—The People's Voice!"

The air became hotter as they delved deeper.

Elbows, shoulders, hands—all brushing against them the further they travelled.

Sweat, smoke—scents like these dominated the atmosphere.

Navigating an environment like this—it was debilitating.

But there was no choice: this was the quickest path.

His right arm suddenly tensed, breaking him out of his thoughts.

Thud.

His head snapped backwards—eyes narrowing on Hiyori's knees.

Pebbles. Dirt. A smear of crimson.

She had tripped—the reason was unclear.

Stress, emotional exhaustion, the crowd itself.

Or maybe... he had been too focused on other matters to notice her steps becoming less coordinated.

He peeked at her expression.

Shaky breath, lips quivering, hands moving.

But there were no complaints. No tears.

Just silence.

For a second, indescribable sentiments coursed through him.

He opened his mouth—nothing came out.

Leaning down, he reached out to pick her up with care, but—

'They found us.'

Irregular movement, divisions in the crowd, disgruntled appearances—all from the corner of his eye.

As if a switch had been flicked, Kiyotaka quickly pulled Hiyori to her feet.

The small stumble had cost them time.

And judging by their pursuers' behaviour, they were going all in on this move.

He upped the pace—drastically manoeuvring through the crowd.

Pushing, shoving, piercing—drawing ire was insignificant.

Reaching the barriers at the front remained the priority.

As they moved closer—passing the retractable bollards, and the tall walls surrounding the National Diet—chants began ringing violently in his ears.

"One Japan, one voice!"

"Ayanokōji is our choice!"

"One Japan, one law!"

"He will fix what we all saw!"

Glancing over his shoulder, the assailants had closed the distance.

Hiyori struggling to keep up had given them an opening.

His jaw clenched.

They were but steps away from their target.

Law enforcement—some in standard uniform, others in riot gear—were in sight.

All they had to do now was reach them.

He tugged Hiyori closer, his footsteps hastened.

'There—just past the barrier. Three more steps—'

RUMBLE.

The ground shook.

The chants stopped.

The crowd froze.

And the police officers were thrown off balance.

Kiyotaka immediately cradled Hiyori into his chest, crouching low.

Shards of glass spiralled midair, delivering unforgiving cuts.

Clouds of smoke rose from the National Diet building.

Ears ringing, still holding Hiyori—he looked up.

And the truth crystallised.

'An explosion.'

Not a staged stunt.

This was a real detonation—deep, loud, wrong.

The National Diet, a pillar of the central government, had been bombed.

Once realisation dawned—panic kicked in.

People shoved. Tripped. Fell.

Law enforcement remained scattered.

And the injured cried out in pain.

Amidst this chaos, Kiyotaka regained his temperament, drowning out the ringing in his ears.

Examining himself, he confirmed he had incurred no serious damage.

Looking down, the same could be said for Hiyori, despite her trembling in his arms.

Raising his head, he scanned the area—looking for their pursuers.

But the sea of people, driven by fear, made it difficult.

Control was gone. Obliterated.

His decision to head to the Diet had not been incorrect; it's just that an event like this could not have been foreseen.

Dwelling was pointless, though.

The objective had not changed—safety remained the top priority.

'We need to move.'

Just as he was about to pick Hiyori up, an alarming detail caught his attention.

'Is that...?'

He didn't—no, *couldn't*—think any longer.

In a flash, he scooped Hiyori into his arms.

And leaped towards the nearest cover.

An engine roared—impossibly close.

Then the sound of steel splitting steel.

SMASH.

A large garbage truck plowed through the retractable bollards, piercing the police barricades before coming to a stop.

Dust spread momentarily before giving way to a horrific sight.

Corpses.

Corpses upon corpses.

All mowed down to create sickening tracks of blood.

Peeking from behind a thick tree, Kiyotaka analysed the crashed vehicle.

Max speed, max capacity, and deliberately aimed at the main entrance.

It was clearly strategic.

And he had no problems understanding the motive.

'A battering ram.'

His eyes drifted further.

And he felt unease grip his insides.

Something else was coming.

SCREECH.

The sound of tires—lots of them—shrieked against the road.

A series of dark vans, with no plates, came to a stop at the main entrance.

And like clockwork, the doors opened.

Masked, vested, armed—they poured out in formation.

His eyes widened.

'Those are no ordinary guns.'

It wasn't the presence of firearms that unnerved him.

It was their type.

'...They're military grade.'

JSDF standard-issue.

The gunmen said nothing.

They simply took aim, then—

BANG.

BANG.

BANG.

Hiyori flinched in his embrace.

No hesitation.

No consideration.

No *mercy*.

They just stood, blocking the main entrance.

Firing indiscriminately on the crowds of people.

Aim, training, experience—none of these mattered.

All they had to do was pull the trigger and reload.

People tried to flee. Tried to hide. Tried to *escape*.

But this whole place was a cage.

And the gunmen stood at the only exit.

Screams, cries, and wails echoed in the air.

Mixing with the sound of gunshots, creating a symphony of despair.

Police officers, even ones with riot gear, stood no chance against the assault.

Vests, shields—gear that they wore for the *protests*.

They would protect against blunt forces or stabs.

But not bullets.

And even if they were armed, they couldn't return fire.

There were too many civilians in the way.

The gunmen didn't have that limitation.

This was no accident or coincidence.

Everything was planned to ensure maximum civilian casualties whilst minimising their own risk.

Kiyotaka reached these conclusions.

Moisture began to prickle his skin, pulling him out of his thoughts.

He peered downwards.

Hiyori was crying—shaking in his embrace.

Her heart was pounding so hard he could feel the vibrations against his chest.

He exhaled through his nose—sharply.

In the midst of gunfire, he scanned his surroundings. Calculating options.

Running away, climbing the surrounding walls, sneaking—they were out of the question.

The best course of action was to stay put.

BANG.

BANG.

BANG.

Gunshots persisted.

Screams persisted.

Then—silence.

A deeply uncomfortable one.

Step.

Step.

Step.

Boots against the ground.

They became louder and louder.

Kiyotaka immediately covered Hiyori's mouth, muffling her sobs.

His senses honed.

And he carefully peeked around the tree trunk.

'Two men.'

It seemed that they were sweeping for any survivors.

A gruff voice began speaking in a *foreign* language.

"This sector seems clear."

Thud.

His spent magazine dropped, hitting the damp concrete.

"Yeah," another voice spoke, kicking the corpses. "These guns really did the trick, huh."

Kiyotaka's eyebrows furrowed.

Lack of military lingo, leaving their backs wide open, and carelessly speaking.

They had undergone some form of training—that was undeniable.

But they lacked the years of discipline that proper soldiers had.

Knowing that, his options expanded.

As it stood, hiding was still the correct choice.

If push came to shove, however, ambushing them was another option.

"Shit," one of them spoke, touching his earpiece. "Boss said we should regroup and evacuate. The military is already forming a perimeter."

The other clicked his tongue. "Fuck! I would have liked to shoot those bastard politicians. Guess I'll just have to settle with the bomb *they* set off."

"Let's move."

Their figures retreated in the distance.

And just as swiftly, the duo regrouped with their comrades.

Driving away without a care.

Leaving only devastation behind.

Kiyotaka glanced down at Hiyori.

She was still shaking, eyes wide but silent.

His grip tightened slightly.

Today was a turning point.

For Japan, for the world, for history—

And for him.

□□□□□□□ ✧ 🅼🅰🅲🅷🅸🅽🅰🆃🅸🅾🅽🆂 ✧ □□□□□□□

Location: Imperial Household Agency, Tokyo

Time had passed.

Too much time.

And Issei couldn't stop pacing.

Things had gotten too muddy.

Too out of control.

Money, power, autonomy—he felt such things slipping away with each beat.

Troubled by such thoughts, his patience ceased.

"Ishikawa—any news?" he asked, biting his thumb.

Equally as tense, Ishikawa shook his head. "...No, sir. I've tried multiple times, but none of our operatives are responding."

One team not communicating—he could live with that.

But all of them?

That he couldn't.

He heard the sliding door to Itachi's office open.

"Director-General, you need to check the news—now."

A ripple of unease spread in his chest.

He had never seen Itachi so... distraught.

His tone was grave—unsettling.

"Ishikawa, do as he says."

Nodding, Ishikawa grabbed the remote on his desk.

With the press of a button, the screen in the corner of the room powered on.

Flicking to the news channel, the reporter's hurried voice rang through the room.

"—we interrupt our broadcast with breaking news from central Tokyo. A massive explosion has been reported at the National Diet building."

The room went dead silent.

Images of smoke billowing from the Diet appeared.

"...Early reports indicate many Diet members were killed in the blast. According to government sources, Prime Minister Ayanokōji managed to escape the explosion unharmed and has already declared a state of emergency. The JSDF have been deployed on the scene..."

Ishikawa inhaled sharply.

Pictures of the military—armed to the teeth, patrolling the area—appeared on the screen.

"...Unconfirmed reports suggest a vehicle had rammed through police barricades and into a crowd of protesters. Civilians attempting to flee the scene were gunned down by a group of unidentified men. Our sources suggest that they were in possession of military-grade arms..."

The anchor paused for a moment, as if deeply disturbed by her

upcoming words.

"It is estimated that dozens—possibly hundreds—of civilians and law enforcement were killed in the gunfire..."

Issei stared at the screen, unblinking.

His mouth was parted, disbelief painted on his face.

"...We are still awaiting confirmation as to whether the military-grade arms used by the terrorists are linked to the weapons scandal involving former JSDF Director Iwakura Genjirou."

The words felt distant—like a story from another country, another world.

His mind churned as the reporter's words faded into the background.

Pieces, once scattered, started fitting.

The lack of response from his operatives.

They were among the piles of corpses stacked in the Diet.

How could they possibly relay information if they weren't alive?

His breathing became more ragged suddenly.

A sickening thought struck him.

'Hiyori.'

They had been pursuing his niece and the boy—Ishikawa had informed him of that.

Was she safe? Had she escaped?

Or was she...?

His heart sank.

'No. No. No.'

He shook his head.

But the dark clouds didn't go away.

It wasn't supposed to go like this.

Captured, restrained, scared—that was acceptable.

But hurt, or worse—he couldn't stomach that.

The phone in his pocket buzzed, again and again. He didn't reach for it.

Guilt hit him like a wrecking ball.

And the uncertainty of it all began gnawing at him.

Before he descended further, however, the door to the main room burst open.

"Boss! I've been trying to call you!"

His gaze snapped to the intruder—it was Kuroda.

"The military—they're here!" he exclaimed, breathing heavily.

Issei blinked.

"...The military?"

Why would they be here?

Shouldn't they be at the Diet?

"Yes! They—"

His words cut off.

Distant shouts. Boot pounding in the corridor.

Kuroda paled.

"It's too late..." he murmured.

Then—

CLUNK.

HISS.

Ishikawa tilted his head, staring at the foreign object at the doorway.

"What the...?"

BANG.

The world went white.

Issei staggered, his eyes squeezing shut.

Voices, shouts, movement.

All unintelligible—his ears were still ringing.

His thoughts felt scrambled, adrift.

Eventually, he came back to his senses.

His eyes opened—a man stood in front of him.

He was unfamiliar—unreadable. His eyes were thin, snake-like.

"Who are you...?" Issei asked.

The man turned to face him. "I am a *Special Investigator* affiliated with the JSDF—"

He paused, his lips turning upwards. "Tsukishiro."

Issei shivered. There was something unnerving about the man's smile that set him on edge.

He turned his head, scanning his surroundings.

Ishikawa, Kuroda, Itachi—all of them were already zip-tied, being hauled out of the room.

What was happening?

Why were they being arrested by the JSDF?

"Director-General of the IHA, Issei—that is you, yes?"

The man's sharp voice drew Issei's attention immediately. He nodded slowly in response.

"You are being detained for aiding and abetting the acts of terrorism against Japan, and its citizens."

Issei blinked once.

Twice.

"...What?"

The man ignored him.

Instead, he pulled out a document and began reading out Issei's crimes.

"Supplying restricted arms to foreign extremists, facilitating unauthorised access to secure government facilities—"

The charges compiled.

Each one more ridiculous than its predecessor.

Conspiring with terrorists. Supplying arms. Bombing the Diet.

He did no such things.

He was being framed.

Someone was plotting against him.

Just as he opened his mouth to protest—the final charges stopped him cold.

"—the attempted murder of the Imperial Princess and the Prime Minister's son, and orchestrating the assassination of the Imperial

Family."

Even if it had been misunderstood, he would've been relieved to hear the words 'attempted murder'—because it meant Hiyori was still alive.

But Issei was far from feeling such sentiments.

His lips parted, disbelief written on his face.

"...assassination of the Imperial Family?" he repeated.

The man, Tsukishiro, frowned, his lips straightening. "Don't act surprised. We know all about your misdeeds and the embezzlement operations you carried out to purchase the *weapons*."

He leaned forwards, looming over Issei. "Reducing palace security. Delaying critical construction reforms. Overlooking breaches caused by the very labourers you both hired and swapped—without proper background checks."

There was a small pause.

Then—his gaze sharpened. "Every one of your actions have actively undermined the Imperial Family's security—resulting in the death of the Emperor, the Empress, and both Princes."

Issei's knees buckled, his breathing turning ragged.

Ba-dump. Ba-dump. Ba-dump.

Kenzou, Sayuri, Kaito, Rikuto—all dead.

...Because of him?

No. That couldn't be.

Sure, he was indifferent to them.

But killing them?

Killing his own brother?

He would never stoop that low.

"No!" he yelled, rising in protest. "This is a mistake. I've been set up!"

Tsukishiro looked unmoved. "Resistance is futile. You will be detained and questioned further."

His tone was sharp—unsympathetic.

That was when Issei realised the cold truth.

His guilt had already been decided.

This man in front of him was not going to let him go.

And he couldn't allow that to happen.

Succumbing to his emotions now would certainly spell his doom.

Anything—he had to try anything to evade the false charges.

"I-I demand to be handed over to the proper authorities—the JSDF have no jurisdiction arresting citizens!"

Desperately, he played this card.

With his position as Director-General of the IHA, he had contacts with influential people who could assist him.

Jail-time was inevitable, but his sentence could be decreased with their support.

This was his only chance to fight back.

That was what he thought.

However...

"The proper authorities? It seems you are mistaken," Tsukishiro replied.

His lips, once straight, curled devilishly—as if he could read Issei's thoughts.

"The *Prime Minister* has granted me, and my *associates*, total autonomy over this matter."

His snake-like eyes glinted with malice. "Local police, the NPA, the PSIA—we supersede *all* of them."

Tsukishiro paused, signalling to his subordinates.

"We have one directive: use any means necessary to hunt the terrorists who have tried to destroy our great nation."

Issei's shoulders slumped.

His eyes were hollow as he was bound and escorted out of the building.

Placed in the back of a military vehicle, he sank into the seats.

And his thoughts scattered in all directions

What, why, how—such questions flew through his mind.

He took a deep breath.

And analysed his situation as carefully as he could.

There was something seriously wrong with this arrest.

The military, this 'special investigator', the evidence—it all happened too quickly. Too methodically.

Almost as if... they *knew* what he was doing from the start.

And were just waiting for the right moment, watching—no, *letting*—him do as he pleased.

A cold shiver ran down his spine.

Thinking back, he realised all these events started and ended from the same source.

'...That man.'

The budget cut to the IHA to sow discord, placing his own son in the Imperial Palace as bait, sending the military to detain him—the Prime Minister was behind all of it.

'But that—that's just ridiculous. Had... had he really foreseen all of this?'

Were his actions always part of *his* design?

Was he just a fly caught in the spider's web?

It was at that moment where despair finally struck Issei's heart.

Clamping down on him mercilessly.

This wasn't a fall from grace.

It was the snap of a thread—one cut by a man *far* above him.

And he never saw the scissors coming.

Neither did Japan.

****

A/N: Hope you enjoyed the chapter!

V1 - Chapter 10: A New Japan

Location: Tokyo, Japan

Lights.

Cameras.

Ordered rows of seats.

And a room full of vetted reporters and journalists.

"The Prime Minister is giving a speech today, right?"

"I hope so, though he might not. Did you see the leaks?"

"About his son and the Imperial Princess? Yes, I did."

"Scary, isn't it? Bombing the Diet and shooting civilians was already catastrophic. But going after the Imperial Family? After the Prime Minister and his kin? They really aimed for our country's vital organs."

"Tsk. To think one of our own would help carry out such atrocities."

"Yeah, that traitor: Director-General Issei of the IHA—if the military hadn't caught him, he would have become the next Emperor by Imperial Law, right?"

"That's right. It's disturbing that the PSIA hadn't caught wind of any of this; just how incompetent are they?"

"Very incompetent, it seems. From what I hear, military investigators have been far more efficient than the PSIA—they apprehended perpetrators like Issei in quick succession."

"Well, we're lucky the Prime Minister survived the blast and didn't

hesitate to declare a state of emergency—that sort of quick decision making is what Japan needs."

"It's still a tragedy, though. With more military oversight, many lives could have been saved."

"Haah. I'm sure that's what most citizens are thinking, too. They're probably furious with the National Diet for not passing the amendment."

"Can you blame them, though? The Diet's indecisiveness has cost the nation dearly. Any trust they had is long gone."

"Unprofessional as it is, I feel the same as they do. Now more than ever, the country needs a strong leader—let's hope the Prime Minister can still guide us."

"Yes... but as a father myself, I would imagine he is quite shaken. His son was nearly killed, you know."

Similar conversations occurred around the room.

Whispers, murmurs, hushed voices.

A few days had passed since *that* day.

The Day of Infamy.

Rumours spreading was inevitable.

CREAK.

In front of the rows of chairs near the stage—a door opened.

Step.

Step.

Step.

Polished shoes echoed against the floor as a suited man climbed a staircase.

It was the Chief Cabinet Secretary.

He adjusted the microphone attached to the podium before speaking.

"Please quieten down."

His calm gaze swept over the crowd, demanding their attention.

Compliance was swift, with people quickly taking their seats.

"As announced yesterday evening, the Prime Minister will address the nation shortly."

The crowd shifted in their seats.

"I do, however, ask that there be no interruptions. The Prime Minister will not be answering any questions—that matter is left in my care, and will be dealt with after he has said his piece."

He moved away from the podium, turning his head to the doorway.

Silence.

The room held its breath.

Anticipation, anxiety, apprehension—such sentiments coursed through the onlookers.

Then—

Click.

Click.

Click.

Shuttering cameras.

Flashing lights.

Changing expressions.

He had finally made his appearance; the first one since *that* day.

The man of the hour.

Ayanokōji Atsuomi.

The Prime Minister.

Stoic, sharp, serene—his presence already felt reassuring.

For a moment, he glanced at the flag of the rising sun behind him.

The entire nation was watching—waiting in silence.

His posture straightened.

"My fellow citizens of Japan.

Today, I stand not as a politician.

Not as an elected official.

But as a survivor—like you."

He paused, resting his hands on the podium.

"For days we have mourned. We have grieved. We have wept.

What we lost that day—it cannot be written off so simply.

The Emperor, the Empress, the Princes: our country's history.

The men and women of the National Diet: our country's leaders.

And most importantly—you. The people: our country's pride and strength."

The crowd lowered their heads.

A solemn feeling rose in the air as the silence dragged.

"I will not tell you how you should feel.

Angry, anguished, afraid.

These, and many others, are what I feel—every minute of every day."

Another pause.

"But..."

His head raised sharply.

"I made this country a promise on the day of Genesis—I do not intend to break it. Not now, not ever."

Slowly, his sturdy resolve reached the citizens.

"I have heard your voices—all of them.

Cries for help.

Calls for justice.

Causes for blame.

And I accept them all.

For they are your will—your right."

His golden eyes, once soft, steeled.

"But for too long—they've been ignored. Undermined. Pushed back.

And a system that does that is not a crutch of stability—it is a shackle.

One that will drag us down if we do not learn from history."

Silence hung as he scanned the room.

"Accepting accountability.

Taking responsibility.

Both are important.

And make no mistake: the guilty will be uprooted—I won't rest until they are.

For their time will come."

A brief pause.

"But fighting amongst ourselves—that we cannot do.

Because they want us to be divided.

They want us to be weak.

And they will succeed—if we do not seek a different path."

A sense of unity spread throughout the country.

"So we must change. Japan must change."

His voice conveyed unyielding conviction.

"No longer will your voices be unheard.

No longer will your will be suppressed.

And no longer will we follow a system written by others.

Because Japan must do what is best for Japan, and only Japan."

The bold words sparked a fire in the citizens' hearts.

"That is why we must part ways with the old regime.

And welcome a new one."

The revelation sent shockwaves throughout the nation.

"*A new Constitution that is written by us.*

That suits us.

That strengthens us."

His golden eyes sharpened, piercing the cameras—as if facing his foe directly.

"And to those beyond our shores who sense weakness, and dare to capitalise in these turbulent times for our country—

Let me speak without ambiguity:

We will not accept foreign intrusion.

We will not tolerate offers of 'aid' coated in deceit.

And we will not be puppets to any nation—not now, not ever again."

A boundary had been set. One that could not be easily broken.

"We only ask that you respect our sovereignty.

Our wishes.

And our choices.

For this is a matter that Japan must navigate and solve.

Because we will endure.

We will rise.

And we will decide our own fate—always.

Thank you."

He bowed before being escorted away by military personnel.

Upon his exit, the Chief Cabinet Secretary swiftly approached the podium, seizing control.

Reporters shot up from their seats.

And questions fired rapidly.

The speech, the terrorist attack, the rumours that had spread—all sorts of queries appeared.

"Will this new Constitution reflect the citizens' demands for Prime Minister Ayanokōji to be granted greater executive powers?"

"There are a lot of rumours circulating that the Prime Minister has become the legal guardian of the Imperial Princess. Is this true?"

"Due to the constraints of Imperial Law and the Imperial Princess being the only survivor from the Imperial Family—who will take the Chrysanthemum Throne?"

"Moving forward, will new anti-terrorism legislation be introduced?"

"Is it true that the PSIA will be restructured or dissolved given their failure to prevent this tragedy?"

"Has it been confirmed whether the terrorist attack was linked to the weapons scandal involving former JSDF Director Iwakura Genjirou? Is there any evidence of foreign influence being involved in the attack?"

Amongst the volley of questions, citizens around Japan rallied behind one man.

For that man had bestowed hope upon them—a feeling that surpassed even fear.

And for the first time in decades, Japan had unified under one vision.

A vision for which they knew naught of the sea of blood that carried it.

□□□□□□□ ✧ [M][A][C][H][I][N][A][T][I][O][N][S] ✧ □□□□□□□

Location: Saitama City, Japan

A long corridor.

Security cameras.

And two sets of footsteps.

'So, this is my father's building,' Kiyotaka thought.

It had been a few weeks since the Day of Infamy.

His father had made contact—for what reason remained to be seen.

From the corner of his eye, he examined his escort.

Sturdy, stoic, focussed—it was obvious he was trained.

Kiyotaka's gaze wandered.

No blind spots.

No easy ways to ambush.

No unauthorised objects or devices.

Combined with rigorous searches and constant surveillance upon entry, calling this place a fortress would be an understatement.

They came to a stop at what he assumed to be his father's office.

"Wait here."

Touching his earpiece, his escort murmured a few words before nodding.

"You can go in."

Entering the room, the first thing Kiyotaka saw was the colour orange.

Shelves, chairs, a desk—all bathed in light from the setting sun.

On the right side, his father stood with his back to him.

He was looking through a window that extended from the ground to the roof, offering a panoramic view of Tokyo and Saitama City.

The door slammed shut behind Kiyotaka as he took a few steps forward.

"Take a seat, Kiyotaka."

His father finally spared him a glance, looking over his shoulder briefly.

Seeing no reason to refuse, Kiyotaka complied.

Just as he was about to take a seat, a detail caught his attention.

They weren't alone in this room.

A man—masked, suited, gloved—sat on a couch to his left.

An ominous feeling spread in his chest

This wasn't the first time they had met.

'That mask...'

It was the same one he had seen on that fateful day five years ago.

The masked man's posture was casual, relaxed even.

But Kiyotaka knew differently.

Though he couldn't see his eyes, Kiyotaka could feel his gaze watching him. Assessing him.

"You've settled in well, Kiyotaka. I take it that your new home is... *satisfactory*?"

His father's voice rang through the room, commanding his attention.

Kiyotaka rested his hands on his knees. "Yes, father."

The words felt wrong before they even left his lips.

"Father, hm?" he mused, still peering through the glass. "You aren't as rigid as you were. That's good."

There was a small pause.

"A shame what happened to your friend—losing so much in one day; children really shouldn't have to suffer like that."

Kiyotaka's eyes narrowed slightly.

He knew this wasn't just small talk. His father wouldn't waste time on that.

Still, he didn't rise to the bait.

Pity, sympathy, care.

If anyone else said those words, sentiments like these would be conveyed.

Coming from his father, though, they were shameless.

But also testing. Gauging.

"I believe she's been locking herself in her room for weeks now—not speaking to anyone. Must be difficult on you, Kiyotaka."

Kiyotaka remained silent.

With his and *her* identities having been... *leaked*, staying in the Matsuo household or the Imperial Palace was no longer an option.

As such, they had both been living in his father's estate for the past weeks.

But in that time, they hadn't spoken a word to each other—not once.

Noticing his silence, his father turned to face him directly.

"You seem... indifferent, Kiyotaka. Do you not care?"

The question cut open his insides.

It was one he didn't want to confront.

Hiyori had seen him. The *true* him.

He recalled the memory. How she flinched. Recoiled.

He had only wanted to protect her; keep her safe the only way he knew how.

But the fear in her eyes was unmistakable. Haunting.

It reaffirmed an ugly truth that he had been denying for too long.

"The Imperial Family is gone. Gaining their trust by getting close to the Princess is pointless now."

His father stared at him. Carefully.

"Hm. I see."

It was his father who had told him to gain the Imperial Family's trust.

Believing that was his true motive would be foolish, though.

Unlike the citizens that had been tricked by the devil who had convinced the world he didn't exist, Kiyotaka knew differently.

A huge vacuum had been created in Japan—a gap that only his father could *conveniently* fill.

"You haven't changed, Kiyotaka. Above all else, survival is the only thing that matters to you."

A statement.

Not a question.

His father's gaze sharpened. "You and I—we're not so different."

Those words—they were said with such absolution.

But the intent was obvious.

To probe. To glean. To *manipulate*.

Kiyotaka deduced as much.

Yet a flicker of discomfort still seeped under.

His father smiled knowingly. "You know no compromise. When someone becomes your enemy, when someone becomes an obstacle to your goals—destruction is their only fate."

Those were not lies.

They were a mindset.

One that had been engraved into his soul.

Restraint was for the weak.

Power unused was for the foolish.

Carelessness was for the *dead*.

A philosophy adapted for survival, and only survival.

The White Room demanded it. Conditioned it.

But that was then.

Right?

Working in absolutes—only his father operated that way.

Right?

...

No.

The fight in the alley.

Where was the restraint there?

Where was the grey in the black and white?

"Am I wrong?" he asked, as if reading Kiyotaka's mind.

Agree.

Disagree.

Counter.

Any reaction would be an indirect answer.

And the silence was telling enough.

Even beyond those white walls.

Even when presented choices.

The grey could not be afforded.

His own actions were a testament to that.

"..."

Silence.

The tension in the air was palpable.

His father stared at him for a few moments.

"Come. Stand here with me, Kiyotaka."

His father gestured at him.

Cautiously, Kiyotaka approached him, feeling the gaze of the masked man boring holes in the back of his head.

They stood beside each other. Father and son.

"What do you see?"

The question was rhetorical, so Kiyotaka didn't respond.

He just followed his father's gaze as it swept over the cityscape.

"I see an *Empire*—a *superpower* in the making."

There was no doubt, no hesitation in his father's words.

Only inevitability.

"Together, we can build a reality where Japan will never kneel again."

An invitation, a collective purpose, a threat—all in one.

"You will succeed me, Kiyotaka. That is your destiny."

His father's golden eyes—discerning, oppressive, *absolute*—met his

own.

"The sooner you accept this—the better."

He turned away.

"Leave."

Kiyotaka didn't move immediately.

He stood still for a few moments. His mind going over his father's words.

Truths that had struck deep.

The masked man eyed Kiyotaka as he left the room.

His steps were slow, heavy.

A great burden had been hoisted onto the young man's shoulders.

For it was written he would be the heir to the Crown.

Only time would tell whether he would bear its hefty weight.

Or succumb to the will and the bloodshed of its predecessor.

****

A/N: Wow, Atsuomi's speech took far longer to write than I expected; I tried my best to not make it melodramatic—I believe achieved that. Anyway, this marks the end of Volume 1.

I aimed for this volume to be as engaging and exciting as possible; I hope that the ideas and twists presented in this volume, particularly Chapter 9, highlighted this.

There were plenty of hints sprinkled through Chapters 1 to 10 of this volume—with even some in Volume 0—that exemplified the intricacies of events occurring in the background, and even explained and foreshadowed events that occurred in Chapter 9; if you picked up on them, then you should have a pretty good idea.

It's been months since I started writing. Looking back, I can see that I made many mistakes regarding Volume 0 and even this volume.

Unnecessarily long narration and explanations, scenes that dragged, 'telling' too much and 'showing' too little—these were just a few of them.

Since then, though, I do believe I have grown as a writer; through trial and error, I have finally found a comfortable writing style—one that I hope to refine with time.

On another note, I want to address a concern I have seen:

The ending that I have envisioned—and am working towards—completely rules out any possibility of a harem. So, if this is a concern, there no need to worry.

Please do not try to change my mind—I won't budge on this decision. The core themes of this story would be undermined if I were to go down that route; that is something I do not wish to do.

That's all for now.

Thank you all for the support and patience.

I am eager to start writing Volume 2: the beginning of the ANHS arc—a segment that I have many interesting ideas to implement and explore, and a section I know a lot of you are looking forward to.

However, progress will be slow: writing is not a hobby I can spend a lot of time on consistently.

Updates on progress will be made via announcements on my profile.

Please refrain from asking me when the next update will be—I know that waiting can be frustrating, but the answer won't change; it will be ready when it's ready.

Until then, I hope to see all of you in the next update.

-Arctres

V2 - Chapter 1: Intertwined

Year: 2015

Location: Advanced Nurturing High School, Tokyo

A long table.

An assortment of chairs.

And a room full of suits.

"Chairman Sakayanagi," a man spoke, clearing his throat. "We acknowledge that you have served this school board diligently for these past years. Overall, we've been pleased with how you have governed this school during that period."

If anyone else heard such words, they would breathe a sigh of relief.

But not Sakayanagi Narumori, seated across the table.

Through his years of experience, he knew there was always a "but" that preceded such a diplomatic statement, especially if the central government was involved.

"However," the man continued, his fingers interlocking, "in recent times, numerous concerns have been brought up to us—your leadership has been put into question."

A few of the board members fidgeted in their seats.

Narumori raised an eyebrow but listened intently.

"As such, based on the evidence presented to us, I, as a representative of the Ministry of Education, have called upon this *special* board session to propose setting forth a vote of no confidence. Now, we understand—"

SLAM.

A man stood up from his chair, his palms flat on the table—arms trembling, teeth gnashing.

"This is outrageous! You can't just—"

His words came to an abrupt stop.

"It's okay, Matsuda," Narumori whispered, his hand resting on Matsuda's shoulder. "Let them do their job."

Meeting the representative's gaze, Narumori bowed his head. "I apologise for his behaviour."

"Please continue," he said, taking his seat while subtly eyeing Matsuda—who soon followed, crossing his arms defiantly as he leaned back in his chair.

The representative adjusted his tie. "Ahem, as I was saying, the vote of no confidence shall now commence. Those in favour of Sakayanagi Narumori's dismissal from his position as Chairman—please raise your hand."

Hands, tentatively, raised around the table.

"Traitors," Matsuda growled under his breath, scowling at them.

There was a small pause.

"Now, those in favour of Sakayanagi Narumori resuming his role as Chairman—please raise your hand."

Sounds of shuffling filled the board room as hands shot up.

Matsuda smirked at the outcome, albeit a close one.

The representative's lips twitched. "...By the will of the school board, Sakayanagi Narumori resumes his role as Chairman of the Advanced Nurturing High School."

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The meeting came to an end.

Narumori exhaled softly, his hands postured behind his back.

Though he had avoided being voted out of his position as Chairman, not all news was good.

The sound of approaching footsteps snapped him out of his thoughts.

"Chairman," a voice called out from behind him.

Narumori looked over his shoulder, smiling softly. "Kawasaki."

The man, Kawasaki, walked with determination, coming to a stop beside him.

"It looks like the Minister of Education is looking for a regime change in the school," Kawasaki commented, glancing at his superior from the corner of his eye.

Letting out a low sigh, Narumori nodded. "That does seem to be the case."

"They're a bunch of idiots then," another voice chimed in, emerging from the left side of the room. "Sakayanagi-sensei has always adhered to the guidelines and legislation the Ministry of Education had set. Those complaints they speak of are false, aren't they?"

Kawasaki rubbed his temples. "Matsuda, whether they are false or not doesn't matter. If they say there is a problem, then there is."

Matsuda frowned. "The central government has always respected our autonomy—what's changed?"

"Everything has changed," Kawasaki quickly replied. "The centralisation of power following the Ayanokōji Constitution means we are now even more dependent on them."

"How so?" Matsuda asked, his head tilting slightly. "We still receive independent funding from the local government and other private donors... don't we?"

There was a pause.

But that beat of silence was telling enough.

"Unfortunately, that is not the case anymore, Matsuda," Narumori cut in, adjusting his glasses. "All taxes are now funnelled directly to the central government. The funding Japan's 47 prefectures receive is managed unilaterally by the Ministry of Finance; if prefectures want funding, they must follow the central government's will."

Matsuda's eyes widened. "Does... does that mean that Governor Kijima-sensei can't offer us anymore support?"

"Yes and no," Narumori replied. "Though he has autonomy over the Tokyo Metropolis prefecture, he is ultimately subservient to the central government—to the *Emperor*."

"That's right," Kawasaki cut in, his tone grave. "And even if he wanted to help us, he probably can't. It's more than likely that the money allocated to Tokyo Metropolis has been used primarily for reconstruction and relief efforts following the Day of Infamy."

Matsuda's shoulders sagged. "Is... is there truly no way around it? Can't he offer aid secretly without the central government knowing?"

Kawasaki shook his head firmly. "It's far too great of a risk. If even a trace of foul play, corruption, or insubordination is unearthed... *they* will be dispatched to adjudicate."

"They?" Matsuda asked, eyebrows furrowing.

"...The *Inquisitors*."

Matsuda froze, his face draining of colour.

While this conversation was occurring, Narumori's thoughts were elsewhere.

Over the years, the central government had increased the funding that schools around Japan received; ANHS was no different.

Now that prefectural funding had been cut off, their influence over

the school was far greater, leaving him vulnerable to their authority.

Though he maintained a majority within the school board, the future was uncertain; if he lost favour, or the central government swayed the members of the board to side against him, he would have to part ways with the school.

A school his father had poured blood, sweat, and tears into.

His hands clenched, then opened as he took a deep breath.

"For now," Narumori spoke up, drawing Matsuda and Kawasaki's attention, "we must conform to the Ministry of Education's will. Though their vote of no confidence was rejected, integrating the new textbooks and teachings into the curriculum for the upcoming first years should satisfy them for the time being."

The duo nodded, exiting the meeting room to resume their duties, leaving Narumori alone with his thoughts.

As his mind went over the details of the meeting, he had a sinking feeling that *someone* high-up was pulling some strings.

"In a couple months, *his* son, the *Crown Prince*, will be part of the new first years," Narumori murmured to no one in particular.

Despite the unease and the new burden of responsibility, he was certain of one thing.

This year would be the most chaotic for the school.

□□□□□□□ ✧ [M][A][C][H][I][N][A][T][I][O][N][S] ✧ □□□□□□□

Location: Tokyo, Japan

TSSS.

A pneumatic hiss echoed through the air as a bus rumbled to a stop.

Inside, a teenage girl stirred from her slumber, rubbing her eyes gently.

Tucking a loose strand of her long, light-pink hair behind her ear, she took in her surroundings.

Rows of cushioned seats, school handbags, students wearing red blazers.

It was the beginning of April. The day of the school entrance ceremony.

A day where many students like her would begin a new stage in their lives—attending the prestigious Advanced Nurturing High School.

Chatter and gossip was in the air.

Reunions between former classmates, the upcoming school year, future prospects.

As more students piled onto the bus between stops, conversations like these became more frequent.

There was, however, one hot topic that never failed to gain traction among the citizens—a majority of which were... *impressionable* teenage girls.

"Gosh, he's just so dreamy, isn't he?"

"The *Crown Prince*? Yeah, he is. I mean, those intense golden eyes... ugh, I would totally melt if he looked at me like *that*."

"You're soo right! Like, even with that serious broody look he's rocking, he's still a hottie."

"Mhm. And *that* jawline combined with his soft-looking brown hair? Way too unfair, right?"

The pinkette looked over her shoulder—a group of girls were huddled right at the back: giggling, twirling their hair, even fanning themselves.

It was inconceivable for her to not know who they spoke of. Everyone did.

But her reason differed from others.

For she knew the boy before the fame. Before the Crown.

Her gaze dropped down to her right hand, lips curling upwards slowly.

"Kiyotaka..." she murmured, fingers brushing over the honey-gold bracelet on her wrist.

It had been six years since she had last seen him.

Holding onto this bracelet for so long was probably childish. She knew that.

But the fond memories it carried had been her anchor—even in the *darkest* of times.

Her mouth quivered slightly, letting out a shallow breath.

They lived in two different worlds now; the odds of their paths crossing were slim.

And even if they did, would he recognise her? Remember her—the ordinary girl from that villa six years ago?

Though the thought made her chest tighten, she wouldn't blame him if he didn't.

"Everyone, could you please listen to me for just a moment? Is there anyone willing to give up their seat for this woman? It doesn't matter who."

A commotion at the front drew her attention away from her troubling thoughts.

The speaker—a girl wearing the same uniform as her—gestured towards an elderly woman who was struggling to maintain balance even with a cane.

But the bus was packed; there weren't any seats available.

Her heart squeezed.

Immediately, she raised her hand. "Excuse me," she called out, her light-pink hair swaying as she stood up. "You can have mine."

The elderly woman's expression brightened, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "Thank you very much, dear!"

She smiled softly, helping the woman get to her seat before standing at the front—using the bus handles for support.

A sweet, feminine voice graced her ears as she felt a gentle tap on her shoulder. "Thank you for doing that. It was very kind of you."

"Oh, it was no problem," she replied, turning to find it was the same girl from before. "She needed it much more than me."

"Mhm," the beige-haired girl beamed, her short hair bobbing as she nodded. "Oh! I'm Kushida Kikyō from Class 1-D! It's nice to meet you."

Taking Kushida's outstretched hand, she let out a small giggle. "Likewise, Kushida-san. I'm Ichinose Honami—Class 1-B."

Kushida pouted. "Aww... that's too bad. It would have been nice to know someone in my class before the ceremony; none of my friends from junior high came to this school."

"You too?" Honami asked, her brows raising. "Guess we're stuck in the same boat, Kushida-san."

The two girls indulged in some light-hearted small talk, watching the scenery tick by as they approached closer to their new home for the next three-years.

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"That was tiring, don't you think so too, Ichinose-san?"

Honami glanced at Kushida, noticing her fatigue. "Yes, they were very... thorough."

When they first laid their eyes on the school, they felt excitement and awe—impressed it had lived up to its reputation of being the size of a city.

What followed, however, had soured the atmosphere.

Kushida tapped her lower lip, looking upwards. "Mm, with all that checking they did, do you think someone important visited the school?"

"Maybe..." Honami murmured. It would certainly explain the barrage of questions and rigorous searches when they had passed through security.

"But look on the bright side," Honami continued, waving a school-issued phone that each first-year had been given, "at least we can exchange numbers now, right?"

Her simple words lifted the mood. "You're right!" Kushida replied, quickly pulling out her own.

"We should meet up later today," Kushida cheerfully proposed, typing on her phone. "What do you think?"

Honami smiled. "Sure! Just shoot me a text."

They walked a little further before going their separate ways. Though they were in different classes, Honami was pleased that she had already progressed in networking.

Instead of heading to class immediately, she turned away from the main building. There was something else she had to do.

Step.

Step.

Step.

Navigating the school grounds, she took note of some of the facilities the school had to offer.

Her exploration didn't last long: a beautiful bit of scenery had stolen her attention.

The sounds of youthful voices dissipated as she moved closer, leaving only the swishing of trees from the wind.

She came to a stop, letting the peaceful ambience wash over her.

It opened her heart, revealing the true reason why she had sought such a private moment.

"Papa... I made it. The school you spoke of—the one you wanted me to attend... I'm here."

Her smile, though wobbly, couldn't have been brighter as she gazed at the blooming Sakura petals fluttering in the sky.

The sight was nostalgic, reminding her of when he was still around.

"I... I know you're still out there somewhere, and once I graduate... I promise, I'll find you," she whispered, looking more determined. "I'll find the truth."

Brushing the loose tears away, she picked up her school bag.

Just as she was about to leave—a strange detail caught her attention.

She wasn't alone.

A boy stood on a patch of grass, his figure shrouded by the vibrant pink of the surrounding trees—seemingly unaware of her presence.

What was he doing here, in this secluded area?

Was he also seeking a moment of solitude and avoiding the crowds near the classrooms?

She took a few steps forward, curiously.

But the moment his features became discernible, her heart skipped a beat.

That light-brown hair.

Those golden eyes.

"K-Kiyotaka...?" she called out without thinking.

The boy turned.

And their gazes met.

"..."

He didn't say a word.

His eyes simply widened, lips parting slowly.

Without hesitation, Honami closed the distance immediately, her arms wrapping around him in mere seconds.

"I-It's really you, isn't it?" she mumbled, burying her face into his chest. "You're here... you're really here..."

Pulling back slightly, her head craned upwards—shaky blue eyes meeting his. "Do... do you remember me?"

Her hands pressed against him for support, trembling in wait, hoping that he did.

For a few tense moments, he didn't say anything.

But there was something indescribable... something *raw* in his gaze.

Then, without warning, he tucked her back into his broad frame. Her breath hitched at the sudden yet gentle touch of his palm as he cradled her head.

"Yes, Honami... I remember," he said softly, his eyes closing as he rested his chin atop her dome. "I told you—I would never forget."

Hearing those words whispered so tenderly against her hair, her vision blurred as tears of joy prickled her eyelids.

"I... I'm so glad," she murmured, nuzzling deeper into the warmth of his embrace, his comfortable scent.

No more words were needed.

They just stood in silence, holding each other.

After six long years, the two young souls had reunited.

Each had incurred their own hardships—difficulties that had tested them.

Yet, in that fleeting moment beneath the falling cherry blossoms, it felt as if the weight of the world had finally eased—if only for a little while.

****

A/N: Hi all, welcome to Volume 2. From now onwards, I'm sticking to shorter chapters: they're easier to proofread, and I find myself writing 'more' in less words—which prevents me from overexplaining, repeating myself, and writing unnecessarily long exposition.

Now, before reading any further, please note that there will be divergences from the original light novel. This story won't be completely cannon compliant, and I will add or change details that better suit this story's narrative. I don't want to confine the ideas I have thought of strictly to the original series—it would just kill my motivation to write. So please be aware of that.

As for the original characters, I'll do my best to keep them 'in character' but no promises; I don't have the time nor the desire to reread the original series and familiarise myself with how they speak or behave in different circumstances. So, if you do feel they're not acting in character, this is the reason.

Anyway, hope you enjoyed the chapter!

V2 - Chapter 2: Perception

Location: Advanced Nurturing High School, Tokyo

Kiyotaka thought he had got used to it.

The looks. The stares. The eyes that never left his figure—gleaning for information, openings, weaknesses.

His time in the White Room had made that as essential as breathing.

Yet, as he walked through a long corridor towards his new class—thoughts in disarray after an unexpected reunion—the gazes that followed him carried a new weight.

Shock. Awe. Reverence.

His jaw ticked.

They had a romanticised view of him, as if he were a pop idol—an image that was a far cry from reality.

'I'm sure he would be pleased to know his photo-ops worked as intended.'

Public sightings, private images, short videos—mediums to convey information and warp perception.

The possibilities were endless: the title of Crown Prince was a propaganda gold mine that would fuel support for the regime and distract even the wary from its flaws.

Considering past deeds, Kiyotaka would expect no less from his father.

He let out a low breath. There was a silver lining: most people who had recognised him hadn't tried to talk to him yet. His title simultaneously drew attention and made it difficult to easily

approach him.

That wouldn't last long, though. Kiyotaka was certain of that.

Stopping briefly, he checked the time on his phone.

'I'm not early or late. Good.'

Interacting with people was inevitable. He knew that.

Calling him socially inept wouldn't be accurate. His time spent in the outside world, particularly in the Matsuo household, had prepped him in that regard.

Peace of mind just took precedence. That was all.

Stepping into the classroom marked "1-D", he internally breathed a sigh of relief.

Most students were already in small groups, talking and laughing amongst themselves, blissfully unaware of his presence.

'That makes things easier.'

As he scanned the neat rows of numbered desks, he spotted his—it was in the back right corner, near the windows.

'Not bad.'

Hugging the left wall, head low, hand scratching his right temple—he calmly navigated the classroom's edges, avoiding the crowds near specific desks.

His chair creaked as he took his seat, though the sound was lost amongst the chatter.

Resting his face on his right palm, he peered out of the windows.

'That... didn't go horribly.'

There were a few lingering gazes, but those were from classmates who were sitting alone, probably having nothing better to do.

Like this raven-haired girl right next to him. What was her deal?

'Read your book. Stop looking at me.'

She wasn't even trying to hide it. Peripherally, he could see the novel in her hands—head turned, ruby irises drilling holes into his side profile.

'This girl... at least make it less obvious, will you?'

Like dominoes, more eyes fell on him—recognition dawning before the disbelief kicked in.

Conversations, once buzzing, slowly died out. Classmates began studying him as if he were a rare animal.

'Now look what you've done.'

From a rational lens, he couldn't fault the girl. It's not every day that the Crown Prince of Japan takes a seat next to you.

Still, he felt a little resentment. Even if it was petty.

The bell rang before chaos could ensue and, to Kiyotaka's fortune, a guardian angel had just manifested in the doorway.

"Quiet down."

Her sharp voice cut through the tension, pulling everyone's attention away from him.

"Please take your seats," she added, walking towards the podium, heels clicking.

Students quickly complied, ready to listen attentively.

"Good morning students. I am Chabashira Sae, your instructor for Class D, and homeroom and history teacher for the next three years. It is a pleasure to meet you all. I hope to get to know all of you over the duration of your studies."

Her long brown hair, tied into a ponytail, swayed as she walked

forwards—pamphlets in her hands.

"Take one and pass it along. These written materials will provide information on the school's special rules as well as other guidelines to make note of."

Most of the rules were what was to be expected, though there were a few differences.

Outside contact with anyone, leaving school grounds, living in other forms of accommodation—all forbidden without permission.

The most unique feature, however, was the S-System.

"These are your Student IDs," Chabashira explained, walking from desk to desk, handing out thin, metallic cards. "They serve as both identification and your means of purchasing goods and services that the campus has to offer—like a credit card of sorts. Just swipe the metallic scanner to use it."

Having finished distributing the Student IDs, her calm brown eyes swept over the classroom.

"The school has its own currency: we call them private points. These points are distributed on the first of every month. Everyone should have already received 100,000 points; one point is equivalent to one yen."

The revelation sent shockwaves through the room.

Chabashira crossed her arms, raising her eyebrow. "Surprised? This school evaluates its students based on merits. Everyone here passed the entrance exam, and the amount you received reflects that. Your points can be used without restraint—anything on school premises is available for purchase."

Her words seemed to fall on deaf ears, most students too excited to listen carefully.

"Upon graduation, any points left over are returned to the school; there is no benefit to saving them. However, if you still wish to not spend your points, you can transfer them to other students. Extortion

is prohibited, however. This school monitors bullying very carefully."

She scanned the room, her eyes soon meeting Kiyotaka's, holding it for a few seconds before looking away.

"If there are no questions, you have a free period until the scheduled entrance ceremony held in the gymnasium. Attendance is mandatory. Roll call will be done there."

With that, she took her leave, not sparing another glance.

Unperturbed and invigorated, students around the room began discussing their new plans.

"Hey, hey! We should, like, totally do some shopping after the ceremony, right?"

"That's a great idea! We can buy anything with this allowance."

"Mhm. Gosh, I'm so glad I got into this school."

Before they could get too carried away, a young man with dirty-blonde hair stood up.

"Everyone," he called out politely, "could I please have your attention for just a moment?"

His charming appearance immediately drew looks, particularly from the girls.

"For the next three years, we're all going to be classmates; I think it would be great if we could all get along. Since we still have some time before the entrance ceremony, why don't we introduce ourselves?" he proposed, wearing an easy-going smile. "It would be a good first step, don't you think?"

Murmurs of agreement and nods followed, their earlier chats now hushed.

Hearing no objections, he continued, "I'm Hirata Yōsuke. Most people used my first name in junior high, so please feel free to call me Yōsuke. I love playing all types of sports, but I would say soccer is my

favourite one; I'm aiming to play for the school's team. It's nice to meet you all!"

For the most part, his enthusiasm was well received, and the momentum he carried influenced others to follow his example.

Staring from the front, one by one, with Hirata's direction and encouragement, they stood up and carried out their introductions.

Some were sweet. Some were shy. Some were normal.

And others were... not-so-normal.

Regardless, each one received some level of applause upon completion.

Kiyotaka interlocked his fingers, the clapping sounds fading in the background.

There was a strong temptation to leave and avoid the fallout while they were all distracted.

That would only be delaying the inevitable, however.

Lost in contemplation, he felt his phone vibrate in his right pocket.

Pulling it out slightly from under his desk, he had a quick glance at the locked screen—it displayed a text notification.

[10:20:29] [Honami] Hey, Kiyotaka ヾ(^ ◡ ^) ノ My class has a free period until the entrance ceremony. If you're free, maybe... would you like to meet up before then? No pressure if you're busy with your classmates, though (ᐟ^ᗜ^)

Indescribable sentiments coursed through him as he read through the message.

Just as he was about to type a response, he spotted Hirata approaching his desk.

Discreetly, he slid his phone back into his pocket, preparing for his judgement.

"Next person up, uh, could you please introduce yourself... Your Imperial Highness?"

Kiyotaka winced internally. Even the outgoing Hirata seemed unsure of how to address him.

'No choice now. The last thing I want is people calling me that.'

All eyes were on him, waiting in anticipation.

This was a critical moment. Kiyotaka knew that.

So, of course, he put in a little effort. Just a little, though.

"Ah, you really don't have to use that, Hirata," he said gently, standing up to address the rest of the class. "'Your Imperial Highness' is quite a mouthful, don't you think?"

His light-hearted joke elicited a few laughs and giggles, putting both Hirata and the rest of the class at ease—just as intended.

"My name is Ayanokōji Kiyotaka. I enjoy playing the piano and practising calligraphy. It's nice to meet you all. I hope we can all get along."

To end his introduction without it being too bland, he flashed a quick, boyish smile. That should make him look friendly and approachable. Right?

There was a beat of silence.

Then—the applause came.

Having a gander at their reactions, he realised he may have put in a little *too* much effort.

'Please stop glaring at me. I'm one of you...'

A lot of the boys were not pleased. Two of them in particular—Ike and Yamauchi, who had introduced themselves earlier—were practically foaming at the mouth.

'Well, maybe it was well received by the girls...?'

Judging by some... looks, it certainly appeared that way.

He wasn't sure that was a good thing, though.

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"Oh, Ayanokōji-kun! Please tell us more about yourself."

"We're really curious, you know?"

"Yeah! You said you like playing the piano, right? What else are you into?"

Kiyotaka knew that being popular was inevitable with his title.

Since his introduction, questions like these had rained down on him, mainly from the girls in his class.

Tiring as it was, he didn't turn such queries away. It was best to satiate their curiosity now rather than later.

Friendly, humble, reserved.

His responses reflected such sentiments, showing them a different angle of the Crown Prince—one that the cameras couldn't capture.

But at the same time, he had no desire to offer anything meaningful; just enough for interest to dwindle so that he would be able to politely leave.

That was for naught, however. The free period was coming to an end and now they were on their way to the gymnasium to attend the entrance ceremony.

On the flip side, the questions had eased. The girls he had talked to were now busy chatting amongst themselves, just steps ahead of him.

'At least Hirata is here with me.'

Hirata was the only other male in their group and had his own following: the blonde gal, Karuizawa Kei, and a couple other girls.

Looking to the left, Kiyotaka noticed a peculiarity amongst their group—a girl with indigo hair tied into twin tails who was by herself, separated from the rest.

'Wang Mei-Yu.'

Recalling her introduction and her... background, he remembered the expressions of his classmates.

On the surface, nothing had changed.

But the atmosphere, the air in the room—those had changed, becoming thick with a newfound tension.

He knew why, of course. The Day of Infamy had only fuelled fear and distrust of foreigners.

Other than Hirata and a girl named Kushida, the other girls in his class didn't seem particularly interested in befriending her.

"Hm?"

Kiyotaka came to an abrupt stop, gazing at the poster on the wall to his right.

"Vote Class 2-A Nagumo Miyabi for Student Council President..." he murmured to himself, studying the stapled sheet of paper.

Glancing left briefly, he realised that the hall they had just entered was littered with them—a detail that left him pondering.

Approaching footsteps and the sweet aroma of perfume cut through his thoughts.

"What're you looking at, Ayanokōji-kun?"

Looking over his shoulder, he saw one of his classmates—a girl with long chestnut-brown hair, bangs swept to the right.

"Ah, Matsushita, right? Just having a look at this poster. They seem to be everywhere."

She froze, her blue eyes widening. "You... you know my name?"

Kiyotaka raised an eyebrow. "You introduced yourself in class earlier, did you not?"

Her lips parted into an O-shape before she averted her eyes. "Well... yes, I did," she said slowly. "But I didn't think you would—"

"Remember your name?" Kiyotaka interjected quickly, turning to face her. "Because I'm the Crown Prince?"

Blood rushed to her cheeks. "E-Eh? No, no, no," she denied in a panic, waving her hands. "It's just—it's just, um..."

She started fidgeting, shifting on her feet under Kiyotaka's gaze.

"Relax," he said after a few moments, his lips curling into a small smirk. "I'm just pulling your leg."

Her gaze snapped back to his face. "W-What? You... you..."

She took a deep breath, slowly regaining her composure.

"You're cheekier than you look, Ayanokōji-kun," she huffed, crossing her arms. "...Making me sweat like that."

"Sorry," he deadpanned. "I couldn't resist. Your reaction was priceless."

Matsushita narrowed her eyes. "Well, I'm glad it was amusing to *you*. I just didn't expect you to remember my name, okay? Most of the class had introduced themselves, after all."

Kiyotaka tucked his hands into his pockets, his head tilting slightly.

"Well, I make an effort to match a name to a face," he said, his eyes glowing with mischief. "So, I couldn't forget your name even if I wanted to, *Matsushita*."

Her face flushed an even deeper shade of red. "Wh—what? You're... you're dangerous," she mumbled, looking away.

Kiyotaka watched her briefly before checking the time on his phone. "Well, we should get going. The ceremony will start soon."

Matsushita, still beet-red, nodded but didn't say another word.

As they walked together, his thoughts wandered.

'With this, the students' perception of me should change.'

Girls loved gossiping, so word would spread quickly.

Though the attention would get tiring and would only grow from here, it had its merits.

And for the moment, the benefits outweighed the cons.

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A/N: I did my best to streamline the S-System explanation, changing the wording to make it flow better. Hopefully, it wasn't too tiring to read and didn't drag.

Anyway, that is all. Hope you enjoyed the chapter!

V2 - Chapter 3: Branches

Location: Advanced Nurturing High School, Tokyo

SKRRRCH.

Chairs screeched against the wooden floor as the first years stood up, stretching their limbs before moving towards the exits.

The entrance ceremony was uneventful for the most part.

Long speeches, spiels of history, presentations.

Combined with hours of sitting in uncomfortable seats, even the most disciplined of students would feel restless.

That is not to say it was *all* pointless. There were some interesting parts.

'*Horikita Manabu, Class 3-A,'* Kiyotaka recalled, moving towards the exit with Hirata and a few girls from his class, ignoring the eyes that had been sneaking looks at him throughout the ceremony.

The current student council president: one of the speakers that had welcomed the first years.

Striking crimson eyes, dark hair, square-rimmed glasses.

He seemed like the serious type. Someone with a stiff personality.

His introduction, however, was not what had resuscitated the students' interest—the two guest speakers towards the end of the ceremony were responsible for that.

"Hey, what did you think of the hybridized cadetship program that military fellow talked about?"

"Shirogane, you mean? It sounds interesting, I guess. A fast-track into the Japanese Armed Forces would be nice."

"Yeah, and the added benefits offered are actually quite good, don't you think?"

"Well, the extra private points *are* a nice incentive, but having to give up your weekends for it is a pretty big downside."

"That's true. The training is no joke either, too. I imagine only people who are dead set on joining the military would be willing to do it."

"You're probably right. But didn't that politician say there were already a lot of candidates since high schools around Japan have already endorsed the program? Maybe it's not so bad."

"C'mon, you guys are forgetting the best part. They said we might get instruction from the *Inquisitors*. Isn't that cool as heck?"

"Now that you mention it, that does sound pretty sick. Maybe it's worth checking out."

They passed a group of boys chatting amongst themselves, waiting outside the gymnasium.

"So, what did you think of the entrance ceremony, Ayanokōji-kun?" Matsushita asked, walking beside him.

Kiyotaka glanced at her briefly before looking straight ahead. "It definitely wasn't the most... exciting experience. I would have fallen asleep if it weren't for the guest speakers towards the end."

She let out a small giggle. "I think a lot of the first years would agree with you. Still, I didn't expect someone from the Imperial Diet to be one of them, especially not an influential member from the Senate at that."

Kiyotaka raised an eyebrow. "You have an interest in politics?"

"Mhm, but it's mainly because of my dad," she explained. "He always liked discussing current events at the dining table during meals, so I guess it just stuck with me."

"I see. Well, do you have an opinion on what they talked about—Senator Nagumo and Director Shirogane, that is?"

Matsushita looked up as if in contemplation. "Let's see, I think it's definitely a great opportunity for citizens who are looking for work and want a career in the Japanese Armed Forces, but..."

"But?"

"Well, I would have thought that the school's near 100 percent placement rate for students entering higher education or the workforce would extend to the Japanese Armed Forces, which would make the cadetship program they talked about redundant," she commented before her voice took a lower tone.

"Though now that I think about it... they likely have their own independent tests or prerequisites to enter the military."

There was a brief silence before she spoke up again.

"Anyway, I guess I was just surprised that it was something *this* school would offer," she carried on. "But with the new Constitution and someone as prominent as Senator Nagumo supporting the initiative, it makes sense why, I suppose."

Reaching a point where the crowd wasn't so dense, Hirata stopped and turned around, cutting their conversation short.

"Since we have no more classes for the rest of the day, I was thinking of having lunch now," he said, flashing a charming smile. "Would anyone like to join me?"

The girls' eyes lit up.

"That's a great idea! What do you think, Nene-chan?" a girl named Satō beamed, looking to her right.

"Yeah, sounds good to me," Mori smiled softly, tucking a loose strand of her shoulder-length brown hair behind her ear.

Karuizawa stretched her arms and groaned. "Ugh, me too. After that snooze-fest, I'm totally in need of some food."

"Count me in as well," Matsushita piped up, pulling out a pamphlet from her blazer's pocket.

"Keyaki Mall has a lot of options," she continued, reading through the handout that Chabashira had given them earlier. "We can do lunch there then maybe shop afterwards."

Her idea was well received, hums of agreement ringing through the air.

With them and others satisfied with the plan, their eyes naturally turned to Kiyotaka.

Though the excitement in their expressions was palpable, only one thought reigned in his mind:

'I want to go to sleep.'

It was still early into the afternoon, yet he was already out of charge.

The questions, the small-talk, the *act*—it was more draining than expected.

Despite that, he knew it was best to just brute force his way through today for the sake of the future.

Just as he was about to make his move, someone else made it for him.

"Kiyotaka!"

His back went rigid.

He knew whose voice that was.

There was only one person who was that familiar with him in this school and didn't care about his title.

But it was too soon. Too *public*.

Turning on his shoulder, he saw that signature sway of light-pink hair.

"Honami," he replied calmly, shifting his gaze to her entourage, which consisted of Class B students as well as Kushida and a couple other Class D girls.

With that singular word, questioning looks were directed at him, both from her and his classmates.

The timing could not have been worse.

'At least Hirata and I aren't the only boys here now,' he thought, scanning Honami's group.

His eyes suddenly stilled, widening slightly upon seeing a familiar face—a sharp-looking boy with violet-bluish hair.

'He's in the same class as her?'

Kushida leaned forwards, tilting her head—eyes darting between Honami and Kiyotaka. "Mm? Do you two know each other?" she asked innocently, breaking him out of his train of thought.

Kiyotaka internally sighed.

This was going to take a while.

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TING.

The automatic doors to the convenience store chimed as more students trudged in.

At the back near the refrigerated section, with a basket in his left hand, Kiyotaka let out a low breath.

'I hate shopping.'

Correction: he hated shopping in a group with few males and too many females.

'At least this is our last stop.'

It had been hours since their group ate lunch.

Hours.

Not one. Not two.

But three.

Three hours.

That was the price of shopping with a group dominated by girls who were happy to splurge their money on whatever caught their eye.

Clothes, shoes, accessories—the list was endless.

Adding non-stop gossip, cutesy compliments, and indecisiveness was only the kicker.

Mix all of that with the questions, primarily from Class B and Class D girls, about his connection with a certain pinkette, he was more than ready to call it a day.

But the school had given this buffer time solely for first years to get their affairs in order before classes officially started tomorrow.

So this last trip was necessary.

Having a gander, Kiyotaka took in his surroundings.

Snacks, toiletries, self-care products—all stacked on rows of shelves.

And people. Too many people.

It could have been worse, of course. If this was the only convenience store, he would probably have had to wait in line to enter.

Thankfully, it wasn't.

Because of that, however, the original group he had been with had split off into smaller ones—some going to their dorms to offload their bags and others, who hadn't purchased as much, going to shops with fewer crowds.

He had come to this store with Honami and a few other girls from Class B.

Since there were no other boys and he was giving the girls privacy while they were in aisles that catered to feminine products, he was on his own for now.

Kiyotaka slipped his phone out of his pocket, unlocking it.

'On the bright side, Hirata isn't the only male I can talk to now,' he mused, glancing at the long list of contacts on his screen.

While scrolling through his phone, a glimpse of long, purple hair caught his attention from the corner of his eye.

'Hm?'

Looking left then right, the girl quickly but carefully opened one of the cabinet doors in the refrigerated section, rummaging through for a few moments before taking out a can and slipping it into her blazer.

'...Is she shoplifting?'

The timing wasn't bad. It was very busy today.

With the high foot traffic in the store, it would be difficult to keep track of everyone, even if there were cameras watching.

"Hey, Kiyotaka! Are you finished with your shopping?"

A cheerful voice called out to him from behind, breaking him out of his thoughts.

Kiyotaka turned around, exiting the camera app before tucking his phone back into his pocket.

"Yeah, just finished collecting what I need," he said, gesturing at his full basket. "Are you and the others all set?"

"Yup." Honami beamed, popping the p. "Shall we go, then?"

He nodded, regrouping with her classmates before walking towards the register at the front.

As he waited in line, the weight of curious eyes never waned.

'They're still hesitant to approach me.'

That would soon change.

Once word got around about his approachable and friendly personality, the constant looks from a distance would turn to spontaneous introductions—all with different intentions.

Curious, frivolous, *ulterior*.

No matter the motive, being prepared was necessary.

With it now being his turn, he waited patiently as the cashier scanned his items.

Though as his purchases were being bagged, an interesting detail stood out to him near the register.

The bare minimum necessities for students to survive—all free for the taking.

'What a kind-hearted institution,' he thought before leaving the convenience store with Honami and the other girls.

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"Ugh, I'm totally beat. I can't wait to sleep," a girl spoke, stretching her arms.

"Me too. It's been such a long day," another remarked, her shoulders slouching under the weight of her shopping bags.

"Right?" the first girl replied. "Still, our first day has been wild. I mean... well, we *all* know the reason why, don't we?"

"Mhm," a third girl chimed in with a hum. "Who would've thought that our dear Honami-chan and the *Crown Prince* were childhood friends?" she sang aloud with glee, smirking.

Her friends followed her gaze, looking back at the pair a few steps behind them.

Honami's face flushed red, ducking her head while her friends began exchanging hushed whispers.

They'd been teasing her non-stop about that for hours.

Hours.

Perhaps calling out to him publicly like *that* had not been the best decision.

As they walked towards their dorms, Honami raised her head, peeking to her right.

'Kiyotaka...'

It had been six years since she had seen him in the flesh.

Since then, he had grown taller, his features now sharper, his shoulders now broader.

She was already aware of these things, of course; his face had been plastered everywhere over the past year.

Television, newspapers, social media—there was no missing it.

Despite that, being with him here in person felt... different; details once overlooked in her early youth now caught her eye.

The way his tousled, light-brown hair fluttered in the wind.

The way the setting sun brought out a richer shade of gold in his eyes.

The way that he—

"Is there something on my face, Honami?" Kiyotaka asked abruptly, his gaze meeting hers.

She let out a squeak, startled by his query. "N-No! I was just, um, admiring the sky...?"

Admiring the sky.

Admiring. The. Sky.

That was the best she could come up with!?

She quickly looked away, her long, light-pink hair hiding her burning cheeks as she stared at her feet.

"...I see," Kiyotaka said after a few moments, but thankfully didn't question her any further.

Honami breathed a sigh of relief.

The chance to talk to him, to reconnect with him after so long had been one of her heart's desires.

So seeing him again after all these years had left her overjoyed.

But time had passed; and as the memories from six years ago began consuming her thoughts, she had realised she had started looking at him... differently.

She glanced at his large, masculine hands before fidgeting with her own smaller ones.

"You know... you really don't have to carry my bags for me, Kiyotaka," she murmured.

Kiyotaka turned his head, arching one eyebrow. "Hm? Isn't that why you reached out to me after the ceremony—to carry all your shopping bags?"

Her eyes widened in a panic.

"I-I didn't do it for that reason. I promise! It's... It's just that there were no more classes today, and I wanted to see you again and—and —"

"Honami," he cut her off, eyes full of mischief. "I'm just teasing. It really isn't a problem. I was the one who offered to carry them, so don't feel guilty about it."

She studied his face for a few moments. "Okay... only if you're sure,"

she mumbled. "I... I just don't want to trouble you any more than I have."

Kiyotaka tilted his head. "More than you have?"

"You know..." she trailed off, fiddling with the hem of her skirt. "That time when I had called out to you after the entrance ceremony. Dealing with all those questions because of me must have been tiring."

There was a brief silence.

"Honami," Kiyotaka finally said, his expression softer than usual. "Nothing you did today troubled me, okay? I had fun even with all that drama."

She blinked once.

"R-Really?" she asked.

"Really." He nodded.

Her lips curled upwards.

Though he wasn't as... robotic as he was in the past and had a *significantly* different status now, some things hadn't changed.

He was still the reserved but kind boy she knew.

They walked in a comfortable silence, eventually reaching the dormitories—which were two tall buildings: one for girls and the other for boys.

Honami turned to Kiyotaka. "W-Well, this is me. Thank you again for carrying my bags, Kiyotaka."

Kiyotaka placed the shopping bags down before dusting off his hands. "You're welcome, Honami," he replied calmly. "Like I said before, it wasn't a big deal."

Silence ensued.

Honami hesitated, shuffling on her feet momentarily. She wanted to —no, she *needed* to say something more.

Before she could second-guess herself, she practically leapt into his torso, burying her face into his chest for the second time that day.

"I'm... really glad we got to meet again, Kiyotaka," she mumbled into the fabric of his shirt, holding him tightly.

Her earlier nerves faded when she felt his arms wrap around her to return the gesture. "...Me too."

Pulling back after a few moments, she smiled brightly at him, her eyes crinkling at the corners.

Kiyotaka's expression shifted and he averted his gaze, something foreign flickering in his eyes.

Honami's eyebrows furrowed slightly, but before she could ponder the change, the squeals and giggles from her friends behind her snapped her out of her thoughts.

"G-Goodnight, Kiyotaka!" she sputtered, picking up her bags and running off to her impending doom.

As her footsteps echoed in the distance, Kiyotaka stared at her retreating figure.

"...Goodnight, Honami," he whispered to no one in particular.

Turning away, he grabbed his bags with one hand and tucked the other into his pocket, walking towards the boys' dormitories.

****

A/N: I should have mentioned this earlier, but please note that I am retconning any mention of Kijima being a senator in *my* version of Volume 0. It was my mistake for not doing proper research beforehand and not realising that there is no such thing as "senators" in Japan's real-world political system. This was, of course, rectified in Volume 1, where an explicit explanation was given about the Diet's bicameral structure, that is, it had two

legislative chambers: the House of Representatives and the House of Councillors.

Now, I'm not sure whether the mention of senators was a translation error in the *canonical* version of Volume 0—which I had used as a baseline to construct the plot for *my* version of Volume 0—or that Kinusaga is simply using a different political system entirely; just know that it is no longer a title in *my* version of Volume 0 *only*.

What does this mean for my story? Well... absolutely nothing: Kijima would still be an influential member of the Diet in Volume 0, and would still have his own faction before Genesis occurred. Therefore, nothing really changes from a fundamental perspective by removing that title since he would still be an elected member of the National Diet in Volume 0. It doesn't create any problems with Volume 0 and Volume 1's plot as, irrespective of this detail, he still becomes the Governor of Tokyo after losing the national election as is mentioned in V1 Chapter 2.

However, moving forward, you will understand why I felt the need to address this at least once with the worldbuilding elements and details that will be revealed in the next chapters. All I can is that the new system in place as a result of the Ayanokōji Constitution has big changes that will, hopefully, make more sense as the story progresses.

Anyway, that is all. Hope you enjoyed the chapter!

V2 - Chapter 4: Movements

Location: Advanced Nurturing High School, Tokyo

A male student approached a private meeting room, glancing left, then right before knocking lightly on the closed door.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

A few seconds passed before a voice emerged, its sharpness cutting through the quiet of the dim corridors lit only by the moonlight.

"Who is it?"

"President, it's me—Kiriyama."

"Ah, yes. Come in."

The male student, Kiriyama, twisted the handle, grimacing as the door creaked open before carefully shutting it with a click.

"Did anyone see you?"

Kiriyama shook his head, taking a seat in front of Horikita Manabu, the Student Council President.

"I don't think so. I came straight away when you called for me."

Manabu nodded, reaching into a cardboard box full of files before fishing out one for a particular student, sliding it across the table.

"Take a look at this. Tell me what you think."

Kiriyama opened the folder, skimming over its contents. His expression became more puzzled the further he read.

"I don't understand... He scored low 80s across the board in all subjects with no notable deficiencies. So why is he in Class D?"

"Look further below. At the interview comments and past education."

Kiriyama's eyes widened. "Not available?" The gears turned in his head before a moment of clarity surfaced; his gaze snapping to Manabu's. "Are you saying...?"

"Yes. For reasons only known to the higher-ups, I believe that the Crown Prince has been deliberately placed in Class D."

Silence hung for a few moments before Kiriyama broke it, his voice taking on a questioning tone.

"But why? Even with contact from the outside world being limited, I'm sure that the administration knows that this won't be a good look for the prince, or the Crown for that matter."

"On the contrary, I would say this is the most optimal choice."

"How do you figure?"

Manabu adjusted his glasses. "Although his scores are not extraordinary, they are still high enough for him to be labelled as a model student. If the circumstances were normal, he would have been placed in Class A or, at the very least, not in Class D."

"Yeah, I surmised as much."

"But let us suppose that the prince had been placed in Class A. What do you think the students' first thoughts would be?"

Kiriyama scratched his chin. "Well... personally, I would say it's only natural. He is the son of the Emperor, after all."

"Right. But that's not the case here, is it? If the prince—the direct heir to the throne and son of the most competent ruler Japan has seen in history—were to be placed in Class D instead of Class A, what would

your first thought be now, as a *senior* student, with that context in mind?"

"I would think that he is being tested, almost like a..." Kiriyama trailed off, realisation dawning in his eyes. "...succession trial."

Manabu nodded, his lips curling upwards slightly. "Exactly. But I believe there is more to it than just that."

He leaned forward, his fingers interlocking. "By placing the prince in Class D, the lowest of all classes, any future rumours of nepotism can be immediately shut down. That only strengthens the Crown's image in the eyes of the students and the public if the information ever got leaked—this wouldn't be possible if he was in Class A."

"That... makes sense, given that context at least. So are you suggesting that the Emperor himself wanted it that way—that he asked the executives of the school to make it so?"

"I'm saying that it's a possibility. With how the central government has begun interfering with the autonomy of students in ANHS, I don't think it's impossible."

"Right... the new government-sanctioned textbooks and the hybridised cadetship program they're offering," Kiriyama cited, recalling the information divulged from earlier in the day. "Building up Japan's military certainly seems to be the central government's goal ever since the Ayanokōji Constitution came into effect."

"That it does. However, because of that, a lot of countries, particularly the Western ones, are wary of the rising imperial regime in Japan. They're refraining from *directly* condemning our country's government due to the events that occurred on the Day of Infamy, at least for now."

Manabu closed his eyes momentarily, letting out a low sigh before continuing. "Anyway, I didn't call you here to discuss geopolitics. There is a more pressing issue, and it's related to what we were discussing earlier."

"I figured as much. So what is this urgent issue then?"

"*Nagumo*. More specifically, the upcoming election for the position of Student Council President."

Kiriyama's fists clenched at the mere mention of the name before his shoulders slumped, remembering the current situation.

"...Is there a point in trying anymore? Even with your and the Vice President's support in endorsing me as a candidate for the upcoming election, Nagumo is far too popular and influential even with his position as Treasurer for the Student Council."

"Yes, that's a given since we no longer hold a majority within the council due to his influence and the overwhelming number of private points he has obtained through... *other* methods. My veto power as Student Council President is the only thing keeping us on even ground."

"Then, why—"

"But things have changed," Manabu swiftly interjected. "An unexpected variable has made an appearance, one that could turn the tables in our favour."

"An unexpected variable? What do you mean?"

"The Crown Prince. Just today alone, he has garnered popularity that will soon surpass Nagumo's; the attention he's been getting from the first, second, and third years, particularly among the girls, is an indicator for that. There is already a whole thread dedicated to him on the school forums."

With the election being based on the candidate that garnered the most votes, the winner would be whomever is the most popular among the students. If the status quo had remained unchanged, Nagumo's victory was all but assured—until now.

"Despite his prestige," Manabu carried on explaining, "his humble and approachable attitude, at least according to the first years, has only elevated his status; and he only arrived today. It's likely his popularity will continue to grow to levels far above Nagumo's."

Now in tune with Manabu's thinking and having realised why he had

been shown the Crown Prince's record, Kiriyama quickly cut in. "I see. Nagumo must be wary of the Crown Prince after today's events. I mean at this rate, if he wanted to, he could become a player in the game itself, couldn't he?"

"Yes. That's why we need to convince him to join *our* side, because I'm certain that Nagumo will also be trying to win him over. He'll probably move quickly but carefully since we, as seniors, are not allowed to divulge any information regarding the S-System—until this first month ends, that is."

"But how should we convince him, though? He only arrived this morning; we know very little about how he thinks, what motivates him, and what his weaknesses are."

"That's not entirely true. If our assumption that his placement in Class D *is* because he is undergoing a succession trial and he is aware that he is being tested, then promising him the position of *Vice President* of the Student Council could motivate him to join our side. Nagumo, even if he is a popular and influential figure within the school and the council, can't guarantee that since only I, as Student Council President, have the authority to appoint whomever I wish as the Vice President of the Student Council."

Kiriyama crossed his arms over his chest, leaning back in his chair. "Removing the current Vice President and placing a first-year student in his place would be unprecedented, though, wouldn't it?"

"It would, but not impossible with the authority I hold. Since the Vice President is loyal to me, he will follow my lead if it means that Nagumo loses."

"Okay, but what if the Crown Prince has no interest in the Student Council—what then?"

There was a brief silence.

"...If that is the case, then there may be another way to get his support. Based on discussions between first years on the school forums, he has a childhood friend: Class 1-B Ichinose Honami. They seem to be... close."

"A childhood friend, huh... Are you suggesting that she might be a weakness?"

"It's too early to tell. But if so, her *troubled* past and close connection to him may present another avenue to... *motivate* him to see things from our perspective, though I hope it doesn't reach that point."

Kiriyama's eyebrows knotted. "...You're willing to go that far? Even if it's Nagumo we're facing, don't you think—"

"You won't win this election by playing by the book, Kiriyama. Not against Nagumo, and certainly not in the position we currently find ourselves. If it comes down to it, you'll have to do what is necessary. His methods are clear to you, are they not?"

Blackmail, extortion, expulsion—to win against Nagumo, such lengths had to be stooped to, at least in Manabu's mind.

"With his father's reach and influence within the Senate and the school, I suppose that is the case. Still, though I dislike Nagumo, you must have a bone to pick with him if you're willing to go that far, but I don't understand why..."

Kiriyama trailed off, pausing momentarily as if struck by a sudden thought. "Wait... is your distaste of him related to that private points scandal? The one that led to the expulsion of your classmate, Tachiba—"

"He and I have history. That is all you need to know, *Kiriyama*," Manabu snipped, his ruby eyes glinting with a cold edge. "Just be willing to do what's necessary to acquire the prince's endorsement. If you don't, the school will never be the same again, and any chance you had of bringing your class back to Class A will be nullified."

Kiriyama could not refute those words. If Nagumo had his way, there was no telling what extremes he would push the system to, or if the fortress he had built around his class would ever crumble.

"...I'll do as you say, President."

Satisfied, Manabu gave him a quick nod before issuing a stern warning.

"Do not overextend or reveal our hand too quickly. We should learn more about him before making any sudden offers. All we know thus far is that he is popular with girls, and that he is a model student. It would be unwise to apply pressure too early; if he's as competent as his father is, the young prince might have fangs of his own if we're not careful."

"Understood."

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"You look tired, Ayanokōji-kun. Long day?"

Slumped forwards and resting his face on his arms, Kiyotaka glanced up from his desk, meeting his classmate's curious gaze.

"Yes... Too long, Matsushita."

The brunette just giggled in response, leaning forwards over his desk. "Too long for lunch with Hirata and the others?"

"...I guess not."

His chair creaked as he stood up, stretching his arms lazily. "So, where to?"

"The cafeteria, of course."

"The cafeteria, huh..."

She looked over her shoulder, eyes gleaming with mischief. "Something wrong with that?"

'Yes. Everything is.'

"Nope, not at all."

Just as they were about to leave their classroom and regroup with the others, a few second-year students approached them from the hallway.

"Excuse me, Your High—I mean, Ayanokōji-kun," she stammered,

fidgeting with her phone. "C-Could we, um, please—?"

"Get a picture? Sure."

Hearing his positive response, the girl beamed. Her friends behind her mirrored her glee, swiftly moving in to pose for the camera.

Snap.

A brilliant smile emerged on her face as she glanced at the screen. "Thank you so much!"

"No problem. Feel free to just refer to me by my given name. That goes for your friends too."

With a few nods and giggles, the group of girls left the area, whispering among themselves.

Kiyotaka let out a deep sigh, watching their retreating figures.

"You know you're supposed to smile in pictures, right?"

Matsushita, who had been waiting off to the side, came to a stop beside him, amused by his troubled expression.

"I'm well aware of that."

"And yet, you stood as if you were in a police mugshot."

Kiyotaka frowned but didn't respond. He could have faked them, but with the number of times he had been asked, repeating that muscle movement that many times was just unfeasible.

If there was a silver lining to all this, it was that word had gotten around regarding how he preferred to be addressed: people had stopped calling him "Your Highness" or "Your Imperial Highness", though there were still the occasional slip-ups.

"Anyway, seems like you've started quite the trend."

"It's not like that was my intention. I just didn't want to be rude."

"Mm, that's understandable given your position. But if you give one

girl ground, the rest will follow." She pulled out her phone, scrolling through the school forums. "Here—take a look."

A thread with dozens of replies and a series of attached images was depicted.

"The moment this second year had posted a selfie of you and herself with her friends, the floodgates opened."

Despite it only being his second day, he had become a hot topic within the school, his status as the Crown Prince garnering attention from all demographics.

A result like this would have surprised him—if he hadn't been exploring the forums last night, that is.

'Still, being ambushed outside the dorms this morning surpassed even my expectations.'

"Well... it can't be helped. I just hope that the novelty dies down soon."

"That might be a while," she teased, slipping her device away.

They ambled their way through the corridors, spotting an anxious Hirata, who immediately brightened upon making eye contact with them.

"There you guys are. We thought you two might have already left."

"What took you guys so long?" Karuizawa huffed, tapping her foot repeatedly. "It's been, like, forever since lunch started."

Matsushita smirked. "*Mr. Popular* over here—" She gestured at Kiyotaka. "—was a little busy placating some *senior* girls."

"Ugh, again? Whatever. Let's go before all the seats are gone."

With a few murmurs of agreement, they traversed the corridors, continuing their lunch plans.

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The cafeteria was bustling with activity—chatter, laughter, and gossip in the air.

It was difficult, but they managed to find a free table off to the side after purchasing their meals.

"Did anyone else see those vegetable sets? Totally gross. I can't imagine having to eat those."

Karuizawa's nose wrinkled at the mere memory of it as she took the last seat beside Hirata, the other already taken by Kiyotaka.

"Agreed," Satō chimed in, securing her spot next to the young prince to Matsushita's dismay, who set her tray down adjacently to her. "But they were free, so I guess it makes sense."

"Well... at the rate you're spending your points, that might become your new reality, Kei-chan."

"Mouu, I know that, Chiaki-chan! But we're getting more points next month anyway. I'll just tone it down a bit until then, I guess."

With complete autonomy over their income, careless spending was inevitable for teenagers who had just been given what was effectively 100,000 yen; their marathon-like shopping trip yesterday was a testament to that.

As Mori quietly took her seat, the group dug into their meals, discussing general topics between bites, with Hirata mediating if any issues made an appearance.

Kiyotaka, on the other hand, was lost in thought.

The cafeteria wouldn't have been his first choice to eat lunch, mainly because of all the attention he would garner. Though the looks in his direction had intensified compared to yesterday, he did find solace in the fact that students were reluctant to approach him while he was eating.

"So, what was the deal with that student council election stuff that Chabashira-sensei mentioned in homeroom earlier? Sounded kinda serious."

His musing came to an end, ears perking up at Karuizawa's question.

Hirata put his chopsticks down, swallowing his last mouthful. "I believe she said it's mandatory for all students to vote for one of the two candidates currently running for Student Council President: Class 2-A Nagumo Miyabi or Class 2-B Kiriyama Ikuto."

Karuizawa rested her face on her palm, lips pursing. "But is it, like, really that important, though? I mean we only just started school."

"Well, I would say it is since the candidate we vote for will represent the entire student body. There's also the fact that if we abstain or miss the voting period, there will be a penalty."

"A p-penalty? But the teachers don't seem that bothered by us being on our phones and stuff in class. Will they really go that far?"

"They might," Matsushita cut in. "You might not be aware, but the new constitution has brought about many changes to the law; one of them is that every citizen 18 and above is required to vote for the leaders they want to represent them in the Imperial Diet, and a failure to vote results in some hefty fines."

Hirata's eyes widened. "Oh wow, I didn't know that. So are you suggesting that this is the school's way of preparing us for when we graduate, then?"

"Mhm, that's what I think at least. We'll probably learn more about the current system in our final period today, during History class. Chabashira-sensei said she would be handing out new textbooks."

"Speaking of final period, isn't there that club expo after school? We should totally check it out, right, Hirata-kun?" Karuizawa, not wanting to be left out of the discussion, looked at Hirata with sparkly eyes.

"I'm down for that!" Satō beamed, with Mori and Matsushita following her lead, voicing their agreement with the idea.

Kiyotaka just nodded, quietly agreeing to the proposal.

The bell eventually rang, signalling the end of lunch. Upon emptying

their trays into the nearest bin, they all made their way back to class, with Kiyotaka walking beside Hirata at the head of the group.

Despite his casual demeanour, his mind was elsewhere.

'They don't seem to notice any contradictions with what the teachers are saying versus how they're acting, or anything else for that matter.'

Whether they were utterly clueless or withholding their suspicions was unclear, but it wasn't of importance to Kiyotaka—for now.

****

A/N: Hope you enjoyed the chapter!

V2 - Chapter 5: Truths and Lies

Location: Advanced Nurturing High School, Tokyo

"Take your seats, everyone. We'll begin class now."

Picking up a marker, Chabashira popped the cap off, jotting down the word "History" in capital letters across the whiteboard.

"Today's Social Studies period marks the beginning of the History component. Since it is our first lesson for this subject, I'll start by discussing the syllabus."

She picked up a sheet of paper on her desk, glancing at it briefly before continuing to write. "The key subtopics that will be covered are world history, Japanese history, civics, ethics, and politics—the focus for all of them will be on three modern eras."

One by one, they were written beneath the header:

MEIJI

POST-WAR

AYANOKŌJI

"The last one in particular will be the focal point of all the subtopics. We are, after all, living in a critical period of Japan's history."

Kiyotaka, seated at his usual window seat, watched as glances were shot in his general direction before redirecting to Chabashira.

Like others in his year, it was the first day where classes had officially begun, with yesterday being a buffer period.

Since he had spent most of his life in confinement, he was actually somewhat excited at the prospect of going through the day-to-day

motions of a normal student. Of course, not everyone in his class shared that sentiment.

Having a gander around the room, he observed the same behaviours that he had witnessed for the periods before and after the lunch break, only now his classmates were that much bolder.

Phones under desks, talking over the teacher, sleeping during class—they were just a few of the most common examples, with some other bizarre cases for the more... *eccentric* individuals.

"Today, we will cover a brief overview of all the subtopics in this course, so you won't be needing the textbooks I have handed to you all today. However, you will for future lessons and homework I will assign, as we will be delving deeper into the theory."

Despite that, Chabashira remained unmoved and continued narrating the lesson without batting an eye. Like their other teachers, she hadn't once called out what would otherwise have been deemed uncouth acts for students their age.

Given it was the sixth and final period, it was inevitable that, without any disciplinary efforts by the teachers to punish such behaviour, Kiyotaka's classmates would grow more comfortable with carrying out their disruptive actions. Not that it was of any consequence to him: less attention thrown in his direction was always welcome.

Still, that's not to say that *all* his classmates were acting that way. There were the few who took their academics seriously.

Like his raven-haired neighbour, or the boy with round glasses at the front of the class, Yukimura. He was one of the few students that bothered to display any reciprocity at Chabashira's efforts to engage the class in the lesson.

"...following the swift arrest of the perpetrators, that is, the foreign terrorist group and high-ranking officials from the IHA, by investigators affiliated with the JSDF, now known as the JAF, experts had concluded that the Day of Infamy could have been prevented if more military oversight had been granted through the amendment of Article 9. As such, given this and the PSIA's failure, the PSIA was

dismantled and a new branch of intelligence was promulgated: the *Supreme Bureau of Inquisition*, colloquially known as the Inquisitors, Inquisition or the Inquisitorius—an extra-constitutional body that, among other reasons, was founded to uphold and protect Japan's national security."

Holding a few pages of notes she had printed before class had started, Chabashira continued paraphrasing the contents she had summarised from the textbooks she had given to the students.

"However, the Inquisition alone would not suffice in stopping similar future tragedies. Structural changes at the highest level were required to avoid political deadlocks from ever occurring within the Diet. Though factionalism within the House of Representatives was an issue throughout 2014, with the two major groups being the pro-amendment and anti-amendment factions, it was the fixed six-year terms for elected officials from the House of Councillors that made Article 9's amendment effectively impossible—a mistake that cost the nation dearly, and one that could not be made again. It was this reasoning that provided sufficient justification for Japan to undergo a constitutional rewrite."

Finishing off the sentence in his notebook, Yukimura placed his pen down, raising his hand. "Sensei, you've told us that it was a political deadlock that stopped Article 9's amendment, but could you please explain why there was one in the first place?"

The marker hovered inches from the board before she turned, giving him a curt nod. "To put it simply, though there were other factors, it was primarily due to a difference in ideology—the pro-amendment faction believed in national strength and Japan relying on its own military rather than its allies, while the anti-amendment faction insisted on respecting the Post-War Constitution imposed on Japan by the West and preventing prior war trauma from happening again. However, this is only a brief explanation; I'll be covering it in detail during future lessons."

She looked at Yukimura as if silently asking *"Is that sufficient?"* to which he nodded, seemingly satisfied with her answer, prompting her to continue the lesson.

Listening in from the back, Kiyotaka knew that there was more to the story than just a difference in ideology. While it was true the Genesis Party had a supermajority within the House of Representatives and that factionalism made it difficult for a two-thirds majority to be achieved prior to the Day of Infamy, the point of contention was not the infighting—it was the fact that the opposition party, that is, the Civic Party, still occupied enough seats in the House of Councillors to block the amendment from going through for at least another year. Even if a two-thirds majority had been achieved in the House of Representatives, a political deadlock would have still occurred due to how the National Diet or, rather, the House of Councillors functioned under the Post-War Constitution.

The fact that such legislative stagnation was possible during a period where Japan's national security was at risk highlighted the flaws of the Post-War Constitution—a system that was the product of Western occupation and intervention; this all during a time when nationalism and distrust of foreigners was at its peak, rendering drastic constitutional change as not only a natural consequence but, in the eyes of most citizens, *necessary*.

'In other words, an iron-clad narrative to legitimise the new Constitution.'

"...and so, the Ayanokōji Constitution aimed to rectify the issues brought to light under the Post-War Constitution. With the House of Councillors having lost most of their members to the bombing of the National Diet on the Day of Infamy, it was soon disbanded to allow a new legislative body to take its place: the *Senate*—a group with 47 members, each representing a prefecture of Japan.

The whiteboard marker squeaked as she drew a supporting diagram. "Rather than electoral votes, these individuals were selected from the Diet based on capability and competence by the Imperial Cabinet and do *not* serve fixed terms; if a senator's approval rating among citizens of their prefecture falls below a set threshold, or if they work against the interests of Japan and its people, they will be swiftly removed from power and replaced. Coupling this with their few seats makes the Senate a rapidly shifting legislative body—a measure to prevent legislative stagnation."

It was a simple concept. To keep their power, senators were

incentivised to work *with* the nation rather than against it, hindering any potential future corruption for individual gain at the cost of Japan's long-term stability and prosperity—at least on paper, that is.

"Due to the Senate having only 47 seats, 201 less than the now disbanded House of Councillors, to ensure that all citizens received equal and proportional representation, instead of having 465 seats, the House of Representatives under the Ayanokōji Constitution now has 666 seats. This encourages broader and more diverse representation during the construction of bills in the House of Representatives, while keeping the review process in the Senate swift—a measure to improve legislative efficiency."

She continued her explanation for a while longer, occasionally scanning the room only to find the same disinterested expressions—until her next words.

"...with the death of Emperor Kenzou, Empress Sayuri, Crown Prince Kaito, and Second Prince Rikuto, and the arrest of Director-General Issei, Emperor Kenzou's blood brother, following the Day of Infamy, the Chrysanthemum Throne was left with no stable succession. The Imperial Princess, Hiyori, though the sole survivor of the attack, could not inherit the throne as only *male* descendants of *age* under Imperial Law could. However, given the extreme circumstances, the country's need for strong leadership following the devastation left after the Day of Infamy, and the overwhelming positive and supportive response from citizens during the referendum that was held, calling for one man to unify and stabilise the country—under the new Constitution, *Ayanokōji Atsuomi* was officially and legally recognised and crowned as the new *Emperor*, becoming the legal guardian of Princess Hiyori."

The classroom broke into hushed whispers. Before the Day of Infamy, the Imperial Princess had been a point of intrigue, even more so following the terror event. Combined with the Emperor's reverence among the citizens, it was inevitable Kiyotaka's classmates would take interest in them.

"As the symbol and supreme leader of the nation and the embodiment of the people's will, if the situation demands it, along with other executive powers, the Emperor has the authority through the issue of

Imperial Decrees to supersede the legislative procedure—a final precaution to ensure catastrophic events like the Day of Infamy can never occur again. Following this, the..."

Chabashira continued narrating until the lesson neared its end, the ringing of the bell cutting the lecture short. Students began collecting their things, some heading to their dorms and others to the gym with plans to attend the club expo.

As Kiyotaka shoved his materials into his school bag and moved to regroup with Hirata and the others, his mind went over the contents that Chabashira or, rather, the *textbooks* he and his fellow classmates had been given divulged.

A lot of what was shared were teachings and recollections that he had already been aware of through publicly available government documents, so none of it should have been a surprise to him.

And yet, despite that, he couldn't shake away that ominous feeling in his chest. That feeling that he thought had eluded him when he had left the White Room, when he had breathed in the natural air of the outside world and not the curated environment he was used to.

But even in this classroom, this seemingly mundane classroom, he could sense his father's hand on his shoulder—on *everyone's* shoulder—ushering him and the rest of these lost lambs to a predetermined path, a predetermined perception...

...As if it were all by design.

□□□□□□□ ✧ 🅼🅰🅲🅷🅸🅽🅰🆃🅸🅾🅽🆂 ✧ □□□□□□□

After a few minutes of walking with Hirata leading the group at the front, Karuizawa clinging to his side, Mori, Satō and a girl named Shinohara in the middle, and Kiyotaka and Matsushita at the back, they finally made their way to the gym.

Unlike the entrance ceremony, where the large hall had been filled with dozens of chairs and a podium on the stage, students were casually roaming between the ordered rows of stalls, each of which were occupied by senior students who were presumably trying to

recruit new members.

Sports, martial arts, photography, music, tea ceremony, newspaper, eSports—the options were endless.

"There sure are a lot of clubs here," Matsushita mused next to Kiyotaka, gazing between the different booths. "Any catch your eye, Ayanokōji-kun?"

"Not yet. I'll probably just browse through them without committing to anything yet."

"Aw, really? Didn't you say you played basketball and soccer in the past? Why not try those?"

"That was only casually with a friend. I've never played in a team setting, so I'd probably be no good."

Despite his reluctance, Kiyotaka wasn't entirely opposed to the idea. His time with Eiichirō shooting hoops or practising kicks were some of his fonder memories. Still, if he wanted to stay out of the spotlight, it probably wasn't the right move.

'That might be a fool's wish, though.'

Matsushita tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Mm... okay. If you say so."

Their group continued manoeuvring through the clusters of people, eventually splitting up: Hirata went to go register for the soccer club with Karuizawa shadowing him, and Mori, Satō and Shinohara went off as a trio to look at the more artsy clubs, leaving only Matsushita and Kiyotaka behind.

But that wouldn't last long; once the duo had walked past a station with musical instruments on display, Matsushita's face lit up, leaving Kiyotaka's side momentarily to get a closer look at the music club.

Now left alone to his own devices, the vultures that had been waiting swooped in on their prey.

"Sorry to bother you, Ayanokōji-san, but are you interested in writing? We have a club dedicated to creative writing and will

happily accept you if you are! Please take this brochure, it—"

"Ignore this fool," another senior piped up, glaring at his counterpart. "Someone as refined as him would be more interested in classical literature!" He gestured at the shelves of books near his stall. "As you can see, we offer a vast catalogue of fine—"

"You're both wrong. A man of his focus and intelligence is someone who is born for greater things than writing or reading!" The third upperclassman turned to Kiyotaka, his expression of utmost seriousness as he adjusted his glasses. "If you are ready to embrace and be part of the most competitive club in this school, I, as a representative of the eSports club, will welcome you to the fold with open arms."

One by one, various spokespeople from different clubs attempted to coax him into joining their club or, at the very least, accepting their booklets that offered extra details on the sorts of events and activities they organise in an effort to gauge the young prince's interest.

This fiasco would have continued, if it were not for the saccharine yet sharp voice that cut through the pitches from the desperate salesmen who had been hounding Kiyotaka.

"Now now, that's enough. Harassing a fellow kouhai isn't behaviour befitting of upperclassmen, don't you think?"

The representatives turned their heads to the speaker, eyes widening. "A-Asahina-san?" one of them stammered before quickly recovering, clearing his throat. "I mean, what business does the Student Council Secretary have interfering here? We're just... recruiting new members. That's not against the rules!"

"Oh?" Her lips curled upwards into a sugary-sweet smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Did you happen to forget who organised this event?"

The imminent threat was enough to silence him, but the second-year beauty wasn't finished there.

"Perhaps I should move up the date for that report I asked for, Kondo-kun. I believe if you don't prove you have met the minimum

threshold of members by the end of this week, your club will be disbanded, correct?"

Colour drained from the boy's face, shaking his head frantically. "N-No! I... I'm sorry, Asahina-san. I'll go now. Just... don't revoke that extension I asked for. Please."

"Mmm... Okay~! I'll let this go. *This* time."

The second-year student audibly gulped, quickly bowing in gratitude before scurrying back to his stall. Her gaze shifted to the other representatives, who were quick on the uptake and left the area just as swiftly, not wanting to be her next target.

She sighed, hand brushing over her sunflower hair pin. "I'm sorry you had to deal with that. I'm Asahina Nazuna from Class 2-A."

Kiyotaka offered a respectful yet grateful bow. "Ayanokōji Kiyotaka. Thank you for the help."

"Ara, so polite~" Asahina giggled behind her hand. "No wonder those club reps were circling you like hungry pups. Someone like you shows up, and suddenly every club thinks they've found the golden ticket."

"...Golden ticket?"

"Mhm." She leaned in, a peach and warm vanilla scent entering his nose as she whispered, "Clubs with more members get more funding. And a certain someone who's been all over the school forums since yesterday would attract *a lot* of members. Don't worry, though. I'm not here to kidnap you on their behalf... *maybe*~"

"That's... not very reassuring."

Asahina laughed again. It was light and airy, but not unkind. "You're cute, Ayanokōji-kun. No wonder the girls are lining up for pictures with you. Quite the Casanova, aren't ya?"

Kiyotaka's eyebrows furrowed. "I wouldn't go that far..."

"Right right~" She waved her hand dismissively. "Anyways, while

we're on that," she continued, swaying lightly as she spoke, "I was hoping to ask you for a photo too. I mean, everyone else is doing it. If I don't get a picture with the famous Ayanokōji-kun, what will the other second years say～?"

"A photo, huh..."

"Mmhmm! But not here." She waved a hand toward the noisy rows of booths. "Too loud. Too many eyes. And the lighting is just *terrible*. Come, come, let's find somewhere... *quieter*～"

Without waiting for permission, but without being too forceful, Asahina lightly tugged him by the sleeve, leading him deeper into the gym. Her pace was slow enough that he could pull away if he wanted, but steady enough that he'd have to deliberately resist.

He didn't.

And of course... she stopped exactly where she intended to.

Before a neat, almost overly pristine table. The banner behind it read:

STUDENT COUNCIL — GENERAL AFFAIRS

"Asahina," he said, "this is—"

"Oh? Ara, did I lead you here?" she gasped, hand flying to her mouth in performative shock. "How clumsy of me."

Kiyotaka narrowed his eyes. *'What a sly fox.'*

"Well, since we're already here..." She leaned across the table, snatching a stack of freshly printed application pamphlets clearly meant for distribution, carefully tucking a small note between the pages of one.

"—why not take one? No pressure of course. We're just accepting preliminary interest for now."

She held it out with both hands. Perfectly polite. Perfectly innocent.

Kiyotaka reached for it—

But a soft gasp cut between them as he grabbed it.

"K-Kiyotaka-kun?"

Honami stood by the booth, half-hidden behind a stack of papers. Her cheeks pinkened the instant they made eye contact. Clearly, she hadn't expected to run into him here and not so soon judging by her demeanour.

"Asahina-senpai, I—I didn't know you were bringing someone!" Honami sputtered, hastily adjusting her grip on the papers. "I mean—I was just helping organise some stuff while I waited for you to return, so I didn't think—um—"

Asahina's eyes glimmered with mischief. "Ara~? Ichinose-chan, you two know each other?" she asked, her tone dripping with mock surprise.

Honami placed a hand over her chest, flustered. "W-We're childhood friends."

"Oh my my my." Asahina drew out every syllable, eyes darting between them like she'd stumbled upon her new favourite soap opera, one that she *definitely* hadn't planned from the beginning by bringing Kiyotaka here. "And here I was wondering why he followed me so obediently."

Kiyotaka immediately opened his mouth to refute her, but Honami flinched before he could.

"F-followed?" she whispered, twirling a strand of hair, face red. "Kiyotaka-kun, you—you didn't have to... I mean... if you didn't want to—"

"I didn't follow her," he said plainly. "She asked for a photo."

Honami blinked rapidly. "O-Oh. A photo. Right. Yes. That makes sense. Of course. Totally. Why wouldn't it—"

Asahina coughed delicately into her hand to hide a laugh. "Well, before you two melt the table with awkwardness, say cheese~!"

She held up her phone and snapped the picture without giving them enough time to organise their expressions.

Honami nearly combusted on the spot.

"A-Asahina-senpai!! You didn't warn us!"

"I didn't and that's why it's so much cuter~" she sang, grinning at the photo on her screen. "You two have wonderful chemistry. Childhood-friend energy. Very... *very* wholesome. So much so that I should post this one on the school forums. What do you think, Ichinose-chan~?"

"N-Nooo!! Please don't post that!" She jumped at Asahina, reaching for her phone, ocean-blue eyes pleading for mercy. "The last one was bad enough, but if you put another one on there... I-I really won't hear the end of it from my friends and classmates!"

The previous "one" that Honami was referencing was the photo her friends had taken and posted of her embracing Kiyotaka in a tight hug right outside the dorms yesterday.

Asahina smirked, amused by her reaction but ultimately relented, deciding not to be too mean. "Okay fiiine~ I won't post it... but only because you're my favourite kouhai, okay?"

That reassurance gave her a brief moment of solace. *Brief* being the key word here. Because it would have otherwise calmed the pinkette's racing heart—if it were not for her senpai's next words.

"But I won't delete it, either. I can't lose such a precious image of my favourite kouhai, after all~"

Honami, overwhelmed and overheating, pressed her palms to her burning cheeks, as if to hide them from the world, mumbling something unintelligible under her breath.

Kiyotaka, though initially annoyed with Asahina's antics, found the scene oddly endearing.

"Well then," Asahina chirped, shutting off her phone and stepping back, satisfaction etched on her face, "I'll leave you two alone for now. I have other clubs to check on. Don't forget to read that

pamphlet *carefully*, Ayanokōji-kun~"

With a playful wink and a flutter of her waist-length strawberry-blonde hair, she disappeared into the crowd.

Honami peeked up at him, clasping her hands behind her back.

"S-So um..." she began, voice softening. "Kiyotaka-kun... are you... busy after this?"

He tilted his head slightly. "Not particularly."

Relief washed over her features like sunlight.

"M-My classmates and I... we were planning to go to karaoke."

A tiny pause.

"If... if you want to come too. With me. I mean—us. With us. But also —"

Pink spread to the tips of her ears; her fingers tucked a loose strand of her light-pink hair behind them.

"I'd... really like if you came."

Kiyotaka froze. In truth, the thought of singing made him want to retreat into his shell. Even if he was socially capable, this was far beyond his expertise; and though he wasn't a particularly compassionate person, subjecting anyone to the torture of potentially listening to him sing would be a fate worse than even the White Room.

And yet, despite that resolve—

"Alright. I'll go."

A part of him couldn't say no to her, or didn't *want* to say no to her.

Honami beamed, eyes shimmering with a joy she didn't fully understand yet.

"R-Really?! Okay! Um, meet me near the gym doors once you're done

here, okay?"

"Sure."

She hurried off, almost tripping over her own feet from sheer fluster.

Once she vanished, Kiyotaka opened the pamphlet slightly, just enough to confirm the faint outline of the hidden slip—the one he had seen Asahina place not-so-secretly, at least to his sharp eyes.

After scanning the note quickly, he closed the booklet.

' So he moves quickly, huh.'

Having already memorised the details, Kiyotaka tucked it away into his blazer, pulling out his phone to inform Hirata and the others through their group chat that he was leaving the gym and that they didn't have to worry about looking for him.

As he moved towards the exit, he mulled over the message in the pamphlet, knowing full well that the major powers within the school had already begun making their moves—well, *one* of them had at least.

And as he left the gym, he pondered how the other would respond and how soon.

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A/N: Apologies for the large chunk of exposition at the start regarding the new political system. It was a necessary bit of worldbuilding that had to be written to provide context for future chapters and arcs. Hopefully, it wasn't too long or boring to read; I tried my best to streamline it while keeping a 'lecture' tone constant to not break immersion.

Anyways, hope you enjoyed the chapter. See you in the next one.

V2 - Chapter 6: Pressure

Location: Advanced Nurturing High School, Tokyo

Friday.

The first week of school had flown by for Kiyotaka, and after classes, shared lunches, and tiring social outings, he was ready to do absolutely nothing this weekend.

At least, that was his fleeting wish; he knew it would not be so simple. The day hadn't ended yet, and he had no knowing what weekend plans he would be roped into.

CLANG.

Hirata closed his locker next to him, eyes widening after turning his head. "Oh wow, you're pretty well built, Ayanokōji." He glanced over Kiyotaka's seated figure. "You must have a really intense training routine, right?"

The remark caught attention from a few other boys in his class, who were changing into their swimwear, most sharing Hirata's awe while a couple others scowled, muttering crude words under their breath.

"I guess you could say that," Kiyotaka replied, hoisting himself off the wooden bench, ignoring the dissecting looks aimed his way. "But it's mainly down to consistency. My father always told me that a healthy mind requires a healthy body, so exercise and nutritious food have always been staples since I was a kid."

"Ah, I see." Hirata nodded, wearing his usual easy-going smile. "That makes sense."

Cliché as the explanation was, what he said wasn't necessarily a lie. Just a little distorted from the truth.

"Well, if you're ready," Kiyotaka swiftly interjected, not wanting to stay any longer, "we should head to the pool now."

"Sure, let's go."

Leaving the changing rooms, the pair made their way towards the large dome-like building in the distance, a few other boys trailing behind them.

The timetable for today was different from other weekdays. Instead of normal lessons, the last two periods were devoted to swimming, serving as "physical education".

'Only for Fridays, though, as far as I can tell.'

Entering the premises, they were greeted with a series of empty stands, all surrounding the Olympic-sized pool in the middle, marked with eight distinct lanes.

"This place is huge! But where are the girls? Why aren't they here yet?" Ike, one of Kiyotaka's classmates, frantically looked around, mouth frothing like a rabid dog. Beside him was his best friend, Yamauchi, who seemed to share his impatience, mimicking his gestures as if they were fraternal twins.

"Calm down, they're probably still changing," a rotund boy wearing glasses replied, walking up to the unhinged pair. "It takes them a while to get ready, you know."

"Agh, I can't wait any longer!" Ike started tapping his bare foot against the wet pavement. Then, as if remembering something, his panicked gaze snapped to his chubby acquaintance. "Professor, please tell me you've got your phone on you."

"Yeah, I do. The instructor bought my excuse, so I'll be able to get the pictures from up on the stands like I promised."

"And videos?" Ike quickly asked.

"And videos."

Listening in from a few meters away, Kiyotaka recalled what he had

heard earlier this morning during homeroom: Ike, Yamauchi, and Sotomura, also known as the "Professor", had created a betting pool, wagering private points on which girl had the largest chest—a 'competition' that had compelled a lot of other boys to participate in.

From what he had gathered by unwillingly eavesdropping on their not-so-discrete discussion, which literally everyone in the class, including the girls, had been privy to—the most popular selections had been Sakura and Hasebe, with Kushida as a closet third.

Being a teenage boy himself, he could understand the sentiment among his male counterparts that came from seeing beautiful girls in swimsuits. But not to this extent, and not as elaborate as they had made it out to be. Though some of the boys were complicit and had already damaged their reputation by placing bets, Ike was by far the worst actor, having asked Sotomura to record and photograph their female classmates in their swimwear.

Ike's plans, however, would be for naught. During lunch with Hirata and the others, Kiyotaka had already found out from Matsushita that most of the girls would not be swimming today, which was to be expected given Ike lacking any sense of human decency.

Deciding to distance himself even further, Kiyotaka took several steps away from them. He thanked his lucky stars for having acquired enough social skills before enrolling into this school to know that being acquainted with the likes of Ike was equivalent to dropping a nuclear bomb on his social life, destroying any possible future bridges.

That being said, not all the boys had participated. Including Kiyotaka, his classmates like Miyake, Yukimura, or even the oddball that was Kōenji Rokusuke—the son of the President of the Kōenji Conglomerate and its sole heir—hadn't dipped their hand in that cesspool.

'Speaking of Kōenji...'

The man in question was currently in a heated altercation with the class delinquent, Sudō: a hothead with dyed red hair that matched his fiery temper. Throughout the week, Kiyotaka had observed that

the former spent most of his time arrogantly admiring his own reflection while the latter spent his time either sleeping or stirring trouble in class.

Not wanting to be around such people while he waited for the lesson to begin, Kiyotaka approached the ledge of the pool, crouching down to sit on the edge, his toes dipping just beneath the surface. The water temperature struck a perfect balance: not too cold, not too hot. It was clear, and in perfect condition, so much so that it reminded him of his earlier years—a memory from the past entering his mind.

"I thought you'd be here. You sure love spending your free time here after swimming, don't you?"

A girl with long dirty-blonde hair stepped closer, standing beside a much younger Kiyotaka.

He, however, ignored her, continuing to stare at the gentle ripples dancing along the length of the pool.

"You're soooo boring," she whined, pouting at him. "Come on, at least blink!"

But Kiyotaka made no effort to acknowledge her. He just remained sitting idly with his usual blank look, heels grazing the edge of the water.

And yet, despite being faced with such apathy, Yuki didn't cease her efforts to get his attention.

"Subject 004~" she sang. "Hey, hey, hey—004~!"

"Four-kun? Mr. Quiet Pants? Robot boy?"

Nothing. Not a peep. Not even a movement that suggested he wasn't anything but a living corpse.

"004," she huffed. "Tell me your name already!"

She then took a knee and sat beside him, ducking down and waving her hand over his face, peeking up at him with an impish grin.

"I told you mine, remember?" she whispered dramatically, like it was a secret. "Yuuuuki~"

"It's only fair you tell me yours." She leaned forward slightly, eyes twinkling. "Or I'll just keep guessing!"

"Are you a Ken? No, too serious."

"Shinji? Hm... nah. That's a villain name."

"Oooh! Maybe you're Taro! You look like a Taro!"

Still, Kiyotaka showed no desire to address her childish attempts at conversation—until he turned his head.

His eyes met hers, but for the briefest window, that signature indifference was gone.

It was as if something deep inside him had cracked... and just the faintest bit of light had slipped through.

"...Kiyotaka."

He said it softly, quietly, so much so that it could have been swept

away by the lightest of breezes.

But Yuki heard it, her eyes lighting up like fireworks. "Whaaat?!"

She beamed, holding her cheeks like he'd just given her a lifetime supply of sweets.

"You *talked*! You *have* a name! And it's a cool one, too!"

She giggled. "Kiyotaka~ Kiyo-tan~ Taka-chan~ I'm gonna make soooo many nicknames for you!"

Yuki continued chatting away, smiling from ear to ear. Despite him not saying another word after that, she didn't seem phased one bit.

And that only left Kiyotaka with a strange feeling in his chest.

Because in that moment, he didn't feel like another number on a spreadsheet. Or the 'monster' the others in his generation and instructors said he was.

He was just... a boy.

As the memory faded, Kiyotaka realised that that was the first time someone had seen him as a real person rather than just a product of his father's design. Despite all of the efforts made by the instructors to demonise him, to turn everyone against him—she, alone, never saw him any differently, even in their earliest of interactions.

She was the first... and perhaps the last.

Because even in those *final* moments years later, she had never wavered in that singular belief:

"I know there is good in you, Kiyotaka."

His expression darkened as those words lingered in his mind, the ones that had haunted him for years.

'She was... wrong to believe such a thing.'

Even now, in this school years later, where he continues to lie,

deceive, and feel like a stranger in his own body—those words cut him in ways that knives never could.

Because how could someone like him, after what he had done to her and others alike, have any shred of the goodness that she had seen in him?

"You and I—we're not so different."

The vile words his father had said on that day suddenly sprung up again, and he felt a desperate urge to refute them. Label them as manipulation designed to erode any sense of individuality he had.

But how could he when they rang painfully true?

Neither he nor his father knew compromise when someone or something interfered with their goals—no matter what method had to be used.

In that way, twisted as it was, the two understood each other well, perhaps even better than any other living could.

Because unlike his father, who saw him only as an extension of himself, if anyone else saw him for what he truly was, they would flinch and cower away at the abomination before them.

Just like Hiyori had...

...And just like *she* will—if he ever told *her* the *truth*.

The truth why he couldn't meet *her* smile with his own, why his eyes ridden with *guilt* couldn't meet *her*s that only exuded goodwill.

He knew he was burdened with a secret that he could never tell without risking *her* destruction... or his own.

And yet, even as his rational side told him so, the temptation that was the alternative never waned. It only grew.

The shopping trip, the shared lunches, and even at karaoke—the pull he felt towards *her* was undeniable... and dangerous. Too dangerous.

And he could sense it: that if he did not tread carefully, he would lose the only thing tethering him to the little humanity he had left.

Because the truth was that he could handle it if others saw him as Hiyori does now.

But not *her*.

So even if part of him deep down protested, he had to keep his distance.

Just as he thought that, a commotion behind him broke him out of his turbulent thoughts. The swim instructor had made his appearance along with many of his female classmates, who were now sitting on the stands.

"Alright kids, let's do roll call."

They all lined up as the man called out names, ticking off on his tablet who was and wasn't participating.

Though even as that occurred, Kiyotaka reflected on his earlier thoughts.

He knew his time in this school was short-lived; he was only here because his father deemed it so.

There was no telling if he'd ever come back when he inevitably left—or if he'd ever see *her* again.

That was why he had to move quickly but carefully.

There were still a great many things he had set out to achieve, after all.

□□□□□□□ ✧ MACHINATIONS ✧ □□□□□□□

Location: Tokyo, Japan

CLINK.

Chopsticks and cutlery hit ceramic within a suburban home, a family

of four enjoying a meal together.

At the head of the table, Shirogane Hanzo, Director of the JAF, sat—sleeves rolled just past his forearms, jacket draped neatly over the back of his chair.

To his right, his wife, Ayaka, placed the last dish down with practiced care; to his left, his daughter, Emi, was already halfway out of her seat, vibrating with excitement.

"Papa! Papa—today we did presentations," she said, barely pausing to breathe. "Mine was about the solar system, and everyone said it was really good. And Yui said she saw you on TV again and that it wasn't fair because *my* papa is famous."

Ayaka reached out gently, resting a hand on her daughter's shoulder. "Emi," she said softly, a smile tugging at her lips. "Sit properly. Let your father eat too."

"But I *am* sitting," Emi insisted, settling back down with exaggerated obedience. She leaned closer to her father anyway. "They were really jealous."

Shirogane laughed under his breath. "That so?"

She nodded vigorously, bangs bouncing. "Mm-hm."

Beside her, his son, Isamu, stared down at his plate, poking suspiciously at a piece of broccoli as if it might move on its own.

Ayaka noticed immediately. "Isamu."

He glanced up, sheepish.

"Eat your vegetables," she said, tone warm but firm.

Shirogane caught his son's eye and gave a small nod. That was all it took. Isamu sighed dramatically and scooped it up.

"That's my boy," Shirogane said, smiling.

The meal settled into an easy rhythm, talking about their days

between bites. Since it was Friday, Ayaka spoke about weekend plans and how long it had been since they'd all gone out together. She suggested that they go to the park or even just a walk tomorrow.

"That sounds good," Shirogane said without hesitation. "I've been away too much."

Ayaka glanced at him, her expression brightening. "I'm glad."

He finished his meal and leaned back slightly. "Dinner was wonderful as always, honey."

She paused, cheeks warming despite herself. "Thank you."

When they were done, Ayaka rose first. "Dishes," she said gently, and the children groaned in unison.

"Good manners," she reminded them.

Emi carried her plate carefully to the sink. Isamu followed, holding his like precious cargo.

Ayaka turned on the television as she began washing up. The familiar voice of the evening anchor filled the kitchen.

"—another trafficking and child abuse ring has been dismantled," the reporter said calmly. "Authorities praised the Inquisitors for their swift action, calling it a necessary response to those who abused state incentives meant to support families—"

Isamu dropped down onto the carpet in front of the TV, soldier figurines already clutched in his hands. On-screen, dark uniforms moved with sharp efficiency.

"Papa!" he said, eyes shining. "Look! Look! It's the Inquisitors. Don't they look so cool?"

Shirogane chuckled and leaned down, ruffling his son's hair as he passed. "They do, don't they?"

Isamu grinned. "I wanna be one," he declared, making two figurines clash dramatically. "They beat the bad guys."

Ayaka watched the exchange over her shoulder, smiling. "Hanzo, dear," she said, "could you please take the trash out for me?"

"Of course."

He tied the bag, lifted it easily, and pressed a quick kiss to her temple. "Be right back."

The door closed behind him.

The night was quiet. A light breeze moved through the street, the surrounding greenery swaying gently. He stepped down from the porch, making his way to the back of his home, garbage bag in hand.

Approaching the bins, he lifted the lid, heaving the load over his shoulder and chucking it inside. But just as he was about to close it—

"You've been making quite the spectacle as of late, *Director*."

Shirogane froze. It had been a while since he had heard *that* voice, the one that he had hoped would never touch his ears again.

Turning on his heel to face the tree line, a man emerged from its shadows, his figure now illuminated by the streetlights—eyes thin like slits, lips curled into a polite yet unnerving smile.

"You seem unsettled."

"Unsettled?" He chuckled nervously. "No, no. I'm just surprised to see an old... friend. What... what brings you here?"

"Business, Director." The man inched closer. "*Business.*"

"A-At this hour? Surely you jest...?"

"Oh?" He paused his advance. "Are you preoccupied right now?"

A bead of sweat trickled down Shirogane's forehead. "Ah... It's just that my family will be expecting my return, a-and I don't want to keep them waiting."

"Your family, hm?" His hands reached into his pockets, slowly

withdrawing a pair of dark gloves.

"They do seem lovely," he continued, fingers stretching as the elastic material snapped onto his hands. "Perhaps I should say... *hello.* What do you think, Director?"

The implications of his words alone chilled Shirogane to the bone, his head shaking desperately. "N-No, that won't be necessary. I... I have time now."

"What a shame," he replied, turning to face him.

Then, as if foregoing all pretences, the man's smile vanished. "You've been careless, Director. It seems your newfound fame has got to your head."

"Careless...?" His heart pounded against his chest. "W-What do you mean?"

"You've been talking to a great many senators. Takamori, Kurosawa... and Nagumo."

A cold shiver ran down Shirogane's spine. Had he really been monitored that closely?

"I-I was just... networking. I didn't think it would trouble you of all people—"

"But it has troubled me," he interjected coolly. "And I do not have time to waste watching you play the fool."

His hand fished out a series of polaroids from his shirt pocket, exposing the director's indulgence in novelty.

"I care not for the women you entertain behind closed doors. I care about assurances. The *Emperor* demands assurances."

Shirogane's face flushed red, a surge of indignation overriding the tension that had coiled around his heart. "What—What the fuck is this? You! You set that up!"

"Do not blame me for your inability to control your urges, Director."

His tone dropped to something lower, more threatening. "Perhaps now you'll be more careful with your words."

Shirogane's mouth clamped shut, the earlier anger and irritation from his infidelity being exposed waning.

"What... what is it that you want to know?"

The man tucked away the incriminating photographs. "There have been whispers in the Senate. Talks of military technology beyond what national defence contractors can provide." His lips thinned. "Someone talked. Only *you* fit the bill."

Shirogane swallowed hard, trying to get past the lump in his throat. "Look... I didn't say anything. A couple senators probed me about the current distribution of government contracts; I told them that the Minister of Defence knew more than I did regarding what's officially on the record, given—"

"I'm not talking about what is *on* the record. I am inquiring about what is *off*. Specifically, *that* facility."

Realisation dawned in Shirogane's eyes. Infiltration, surveillance, and weapons—technological inventions that the JSDF or, rather, the JAF had sourced from the mysterious black site that he knew in name only. A procurement line he had overseen for years, even before he took on the role of Director, replacing his predecessor: Iwakura Genjirou.

The extent and level of technology developed there was an unknown to Shirogane, but he had inferred that its existence alone was enough to warrant absolute secrecy.

"That... I didn't mention any of the sort. But..."

"But?" the man prodded.

"I... I suppose it's possible that Senator Nagumo may have seen a few... advanced prototypes when he accompanied me during a visit to the new military base just outside Tokyo," he explained, avoiding the man's sharp gaze. "It could have invited... curiosity."

The man's eyebrows knotted. "And you thought it was a good idea to show him such technology?"

"I... That wasn't my intention. He was very persistent! It had only just been delivered, and... and I was trying to find a suitable place to—"

"*Enough*."

The air suddenly felt more oppressive, more suffocating.

"Your reasons for failure are noted but irrelevant—just as *you* are becoming."

Shirogane flinched, his blood running cold. The man in front of him had run out of patience, and he could feel the end of his rope nearing.

"Hold... hold on just a moment. I... I'm a clean figurehead for the military and popular among the people. The regime needs me—the *Emperor* needs me!"

"Being popular among the people is just another way of describing a future martyr—they are but a step away from one another. You'd be wise to remember that, Director."

The truth of those words rung like a bell in his head, colour draining from his face as the man took a menacing step closer.

Interviews, public appearances, and recognition of his credentials by the media—he realised all that posturing for his cooperation had not been the Emperor's benevolence. It had been the tightening of a noose, one that fit only *his* neck.

"W-Wait!" He backed away; his head twisted and turned, frantically looking for a way out. "Nagumo! Senator Nagumo will be suspicious if I disappear! He—He's influential. He'll start asking questions. You can't—"

His words were abruptly cut off as the man's hands found his throat, pinning him against the wall with a bewildering strength.

Shirogane's eyes bulged, hands flying to the man's wrist, legs kicking

feebly at his shins, all in a desperate attempt to dislodge his grip. But it was too strong. *He* was too strong.

"Clinging to the Senate will not save you from *me*, Director." The man's fingers tightened around his neck like vice. "Judges, ambassadors, senators, and even Cabinet ministers—none are beyond the reach of the *Inquisitorius*."

His entire body shook and trembled in genuine terror as he finally understood how powerless he was, the words that followed barely escaping his quivering lips.

"P-Please..." he croaked. "I can still be useful, Tsuki—"

He could no longer speak. No longer breathe. Black dots began darting across his vision, and he could feel his life slipping away by the second. His jerky movements slowed down as his body began to go slack.

Just when he thought his life had been forfeited, the man released him.

Shirogane collapsed on his knees, his hands holding his throat, gasping for air. He could see his assailant hovering above him, just outside of his periphery.

"Very well, Director." The man adjusted his cuffs, straightening his tie. "See to it that your incompetence has not exposed the existence of that technological facility. The Emperor is not as forgiving as I am."

Leaving with those ominous words, the man's footsteps faded in the distance.

Shirogane remained kneeling, chest heaving, pulse still thundering in his ears.

He didn't dare look up, not until he was sure the man was gone. Until he was sure normalcy had returned.

But he knew that was the kind of thinking that had left him in such a state.

The truth was that he was just a fish trying to survive in an ocean infested with predators.

And he could only hope that he was too small to ever satiate their hunger.

****

A/N: Just for clarification, the facility mentioned is NOT the White Room. Refer to Chapter 4 of Volume 0 if you are confused.

Anyway, hope you enjoyed the chapter!